

Date: 24 May 2015
 Opposition: Stoke City
 Competition: League

Times	Telegraph	Sentinel
Guardian	Mirror	Echo
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24 May 2015

THE TIMES

Liverpool ripped to shreds

Stoke City 6

Diouf 22, 26, Walters 30, Adam 41, N'Zonzi 45, Crouch 86

Liverpool Gerrard 70 1

Referee A Taylor Attendance 27,602 As endings go, this was Hammer House of Horror rather than Mills and Boon. The pathway of petals that Steven Gerrard might have deserved as he made his way out of English football did not just fail to transpire, it was replaced by a bloodbath as Liverpool succumbed to their heaviest defeat in more than half a century. As their captain departed, so increased the potential for their manager, Brendan Rodgers, doing the same.

A 6-1 defeat by Stoke City means it is not just the mathematical accuracy of Rodgers pre-match claim that he is "150 per cent" secure in his job that is open to question. Yesterday, all of the numerical evidence was negative. Not since April 1963, when they were beaten 7-2 by Tottenham Hotspur, have Liverpool lost this heavily. Not since 1931 had they conceded five goals in the first half of a top-flight fixture. The only performance indicator that was in Liverpool's favour centred on possession, yet it was they who suffered death by football.

Given Liverpool's owner, Fenway Sports Group (FSG), is an advocate of statistical analysis, Rodgers will go into his end-of-season review with the numbers game seemingly loaded against him. What FSG now has to determine is what is acceptable for Liverpool. With no trophies to his name after three seasons in charge, having presided over a slump from second to sixth in the space of 12 months and with the signs of deterioration becoming endemic, Rodgers accepts that he is facing a challenge just to convince his employers that he deserves to continue as manager. For all the progress and wonderful football that was played during last season's unsuccessful title challenge, Liverpool have gone backwards at a staggering rate over the course of this campaign. There are mitigating factors, Luis Suarez's departure and Daniel Sturridge's frailty chief among them, but a club which spent more than PS110 million last summer expected a great deal more than what has been delivered. The question now is whether the manager, transfer committee or both are held responsible.

Increasingly, though, the greater issue -- and one which becomes more apparent as their own vision unravels -- is how determined FSG is to be successful. Of yesterday's starting lineup, only three -- Gerrard, Lucas Leiva and Martin Skrtel -- were not signed under its ownership. This is its team, its young manager and its strategy. The inescapable conclusion is that this is its mess.

As the crisis has escalated, one which has seen Liverpool win two of their last nine league fixtures, Rodgers has been engulfed by the tide, leaving critics to claim he is out of his depth. A video replay of yesterday's catastrophic events certainly would not reflect well on the manager. Emre Can, once again deployed out of position at right back, was hung out of dry for 45 minutes, playing a role in four of Stoke's first-half goals before being put out of his misery at half-time. In attack, Adam Lallana was paired with Philippe Coutinho, a lightweight pairing that was predictably swatted aside by Stoke's heavyweight defence.

All over the pitch, Liverpool were outmanoeuvred, out-fought and out-thought, a combination that Mark Hughes, the Stoke manager, believes was a consequence of him being in charge for two years and his players being at one with his methods. Rodgers has managed Liverpool for 12 months more yet those wearing Liverpool's funeral black away kit performed as if they were totally at odds with his approach. With Raheem Sterling left on the substitutes' bench, Liverpool managed to give Aidy Ward, the forward's agent, a much-needed PR boost by demonstrating exactly why his client is so determined to leave. The sound of the Stoke fans accusing Sterling of being "a greedy b*****d" won applause from the Liverpool fans but even those in the away end would be hard pressed to come up with many reasons why he should stay.

In the opening 45 minutes, Stoke delivered five reasons why he should depart as Liverpool, tactically inept with numerous square pegs in round holes, were torn apart. Marko Arnautovic took Can to the cleaners for Stoke's first and second goals, both of which were scored by Mame Diouf, before the befuddled German headed Charlie Adam's deep cross straight to Jonathan Walters, who scored at the second attempt. Adam then took advantage of a mix-up between Mamadou Sakho and Lucas to add a fourth which threatened to be Stoke's best goal of the game only for Steven N'Zonzi to claim that mantle with a wonderful curling effort on the stroke of half-time. "The level of performance in the first 45 mins was exceptional," Hughes said. "Most teams would've have struggled with the quality and intensity of our play." The goal that Gerrard craved on his final appearance for Liverpool arrived in the 70th minute as he latched onto a flicked header from Rickie Lambert, the substitute, and fired a low shot past Asmir Begovic into the far corner. It was No 186 of Gerrard's Liverpool career but the circumstances in which it came were memorable for only the wrong reasons. One of Gerrard's former team-mates, Peter Crouch, emerged from the bench to complete the rout with a header from Diouf's cross. The last time Liverpool won the league title in 1990, they ended the season with a 6-1 away win. Their descent from perennial winners to also-rans has been lent a symmetry. Where they go now remains to be seen.

RATINGS

Stoke City (4-2-3-1): A Begovic 7 -- G Cameron 7, R Shawcross 7, M Muniesa 7 (sub: M Wilson, 71min), E Pieters 7 -- S N'Zonzi 9, G Whelan 7 -- J Walters 8 (sub: P Odemwingie, 67 6), C Adam 8, M Arnautovic 8 (sub: P Crouch, 80) -- M Diouf 8. Substitutes not used: J Butland, S Ireland, S Sidwell, P Wollscheid. Booked: Adam,

Whelan, Shawcross, Pieters.

Liverpool (4-1-2-1-2): S Mignolet 4 -- E Can 3 (sub: K Toure, 46 4), M Skrtel 4, M Sakho 4, A Moreno 3 (sub: J Ibe, 46 4) -- L Leiva 5 -- J Henderson 5, J Allen 4 -- S Gerrard 6 -- P Coutinho 4, A Lallana 5. Substitutes not used: D Ward, D Lovren, R Sterling, L Markovic. Booked: Lucas, Skrtel.

NUMBERS THAT POINT TO DECLINE 5 Goals margin of defeat for Liverpool, their biggest in any competition since losing 7-2 away to Tottenham Hotspur in the league in April 1963 8 Years since Liverpool previously conceded six a 6-3 defeat at home to Arsenal in the League Cup 3 Stoke goalscorers with Liverpool links: Peter Crouch and Charlie Adam played for them; Jon Walters was born near by on the Wirral 8 Liverpool points in final nine games of the season; they gained 25 points in the previous nine

the guardian

Stoke City humble Liverpool and Steven Gerrard gets scant consolation

This was no way for Steven Gerrard to say goodbye, even though he marked his 710th and final appearance in a Liverpool shirt with his 186th goal for the club and, long before the end, the question of whether it might be time for another farewell had elbowed its way to the top of the agenda.

Brendan Rodgers faces a review of Liverpool's season of frustration with the club's owners and the manager's demeanour after this wretched afternoon betrayed realism and, perhaps, a little anxiety -- not least when he said that he accepted there would be doubts over his future after this and, more generally, the whimper that has been the final two months of the season.

Liverpool were 5-0 down at half-time, utterly humiliated at the hands of a rampaging Stoke City, and, to put it bluntly, these are the sort of performances that see clubs and managers part company. It set the seal on a miserable end to the season for Rodgers and Liverpool, one in which the team lost six of 11 matches in all competitions and finished with 52 Premier League goals. They got 101 last season.

Rodgers dropped Raheem Sterling in the wake of the negative headlines over the winger's future intentions, saying he felt that "there were other players mentally better positioned to play in the game". But the focus here fell upon Rodgers and whether he could recover from this low point. It was Liverpool's heaviest defeat since the 7-2 at Tottenham Hotspur in 1963.

The lone positive for the visitors came when Gerrard ran through in the 70th minute to slot a low shot past Asmir Begovic and there was the heart-warming moment when the Stoke fans rose with their Liverpool counterparts to applaud him. Yet it was otherwise an afternoon of angst and soul-searching for Rodgers and all of those connected to the club.

Stoke's performance was testament to the mentality that Mark Hughes has instilled as well as the fitness methods -- the manager's teams always finish the season strongly. Stoke were already assured of a ninth-placed finish for the second year in succession yet they played as if their lives depended on the result. Their aggression, tempo and precision served to highlight Liverpool's deficiencies. Advertisement. Sterling's omission from the starting XI had created the pre-match buzz and the substitute was jeered by plenty of travelling supporters by the tunnel in the corner as he returned to the dressing room after the warm-up.

When Sterling emerged to warm up midway through the first half, he ran to the other corner, away from the Liverpool fans. "One greedy bastard," bellowed the home crowd. Some of those in the visiting enclosure applauded the sentiment. Liverpool's woes ran far deeper. This was a bitter and unforgiving occasion for them -- a little like the micro-climate at this wind-swept arena; Gerrard will miss all of this when he joins Los Angeles Galaxy -- and it was shocking to see how Rodgers' team wilted, after the mess that was the opening goal. Simon Mignolet could only parry Charlie Adam's shot at the feet of Mame Biram Diouf and the striker scored from close range.

Rodgers had started with Adam Lallana and Philippe Coutinho up front -- in other words, without an orthodox striker. It looked as though he did not have a defence, either. The manager replaced the full-backs, Emre Can and Alberto Moreno, at the interval. He could have taken off anybody.

Liverpool routinely lost out in the one-on-one duels and Stoke simply ran all over them. Diouf got his second with a viciously swerving shot from the edge of the area, which Mignolet could not lay a glove on, while the third followed a comical back header from Can which found only Jon Walters. His first effort was well saved by Mignolet but Walters reacted sharply to loop a header home.

Liverpool fans could be seen heading for the exit with 31 minutes on the clock and it did not appear that they were merely trying to beat the half-time pie queue.

The Stoke fans were shouting the Olés after 32 minutes and it would get even better for them before the interval. After more slapdash Liverpool defending and with Martin Skrtel backing off, Adam strode through to drive low into the corner before Steve N'Zonzi bent a magnificent shot past Mignolet from outside the area. Rodgers was barracked as he walked into the tunnel at half-time.

Liverpool managed to stick their fingers in the dyke during the second half. Skrtel was a little fortunate to escape a second yellow card for a foul on Nzonzi and Lallana was thwarted by Begovic before Gerrard got his goal. But Marko Arnautovic ought to have scored for Stoke on 67 minutes and the substitute and former Liverpool striker, Peter Crouch, enjoyed the last word when he headed home unmarked from Diouf's cross.

Man of the match Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City)

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The Mail

HIT FOR SIX! Rodgers is fearing axe after Stoke humiliation
 STOKES CITY 6

Diouf 22, 26, Walters 30, Adam 41, Nzonzi 45, Crouch 86
 LIVERPOOL 1

Stadium WHEN the crunch comes, Fenway Sports Group will only need the answer to one question: can they trust Brendan Rodgers? As this abomination of a season came to a dreadful end in The Potteries, with invective and fury raining down from enraged supporters, the Liverpool manager wore the look of a man who knew his future employment prospects were dangling by a thread.

MATCH Rodgers will hold a summit with Mike Gordon, FSG's second largest investor, but the ground he now walks on is anything but safe. Liverpool were not just beaten by Stoke, they were utterly humiliated and the buck stops with the STOKES CITY (4-4-2): Cameron, Shawcross, (Wilson 71), Pieters; man who stood helplessly in the technical area.

Walters (Odemwingie Arnautovic (Crouch not used: Ireland, Wolscheid. Booked: Shawcross, Pieters. LIVERPOOL (4-4-1-(Toure 46), Skrtel, (Ibe 46); Henderson, (Lambert 69), Lallana. Subs not Sterling, Markovic, Lucas, Skrtel. Referee: Anthony Attendance: 27,602. Man of the match: Some defeats can be explained, but this? Stoke tore them asunder, capitalising on the tactical chaos that scrambled Liverpool's senses; they bullied them, outmuscled them and inflicted their heaviest loss since 1963.

So this is where it becomes interesting for FSG. They have invested more than PS200million since Rodgers arrived three years ago and you would say similar investment needs to be made to get them where they want to be.

Is he the man to oversee the rebuild? Should there even need to be a rebuild? Only Gordon can answer those questions.

But as Rodgers sat solemnly dealing with enquiries about how he can lift the club, the look on his face was telling. He is no longer in control of his own destiny.

'All supporters connected with Liverpool will be embarrassed by that and deserve an apology,' said Rodgers. 'The first half was awful. Absolutely awful. I have always said if the owners want me to go, I go. It is as simple as that. But I still feel I have a lot to offer here.' That last point is now debatable.

Why did this team start with no natural right-back? How did Liverpool sign three strikers last summer yet began this contest without one on the pitch? What formation were they playing? Why couldn't Rodgers stop the humiliation unfolding? FACTS Begovic; Muniesa Nzonzi, Whelan, 67), Adam; 81), Diouf. Subs Sidwell, Butland, Adam, Whelan, Stoke's story deserves more than second billing in this narrative. Mark Hughes has done a superb job and these three points helped them to their best ever tally in the Premier League.

Mignolet; Can Sakho, Moreno Lucas, Allen Coutinho; used: Lovren, Ward. Booked: Taylor.

Steven Nzonzi.
 It took Stoke 22 minutes to score, Mame Diouf tapping in after Simon Mignolet fumbled Charlie Adam's drive. Then the floodgates opened.

Diouf doubled the advantage with a drive from the edge of the 18-yard area, then Jonathon Walters pounced after Emre Can headed a loose ball to the forward. Two more goals finished Liverpool before the interval, the first from Adam, the latter from the outstanding Steven Nzonzi.

Steven Gerrard, on his swansong, reduced the deficit with his 186th career goal but the ignominy was not over for Liverpool as Peter Crouch put the gloss on a fabulous afternoon for the home side.

The Daily Telegraph

Rodgers fears the sack after Stoke shocker; Farewells to remember
 Gerrard suffers as Lampard celebrates

Diouf 22, 26, Walters 30, Adam 41, N'Zonzi 45, Crouch 86 Gerrard 70 Att: 27,602
 Brendan Rodgers accepted his reign as Liverpool manager has been plunged into doubt following this humiliating final-day defeat at Stoke City.

The Northern Irishman knows his immediate future is now in the hands of the club's American owners, Fenway Sports Group, after a 6-1 defeat he described as "embarrassing". It was Liverpool's worst defeat since they lost 7-2 to Tottenham in 1963, and resulted in the manager issuing an apology to fans. Liverpool conceded five goals in the first half.

The consequences for Rodgers could be severe. Asked directly if he accepted there would be questions about his future, Rodgers said: "Absolutely I have always said if the owners want me to go, I go. It is as simple as that. But I still feel I have a lot to offer here."

"Last season when everything was working well you have the support of everyone but performances like today do not help you. I am fully aware of that. There is a lot that has happened here which has made the job difficult and we have kept fighting right to the very end. But I totally understand that.

"My pride makes me want to be in this job. I love this job and I love this club and it has been a difficult season but, like I said, if the owners ever say to me to go, I go. I understand that we need to be better than that we have shown in recent weeks.

"There are a number of key elements of the performance today that didn't surprise me, if I am being honest. There are areas which will we address in the summer that will help us become much more competitive and consistent and be up there from the beginning of the season. We as a club will work very hard to make that happen.

"The [supporters] have every right to be angry. That was awful in the first half. Absolutely awful.

"This season has been a tough season and towards the end of this period now we have come up short and the only way you get support is by winning games. We haven't won enough games in this last couple of months so they have every right to be angry and frustrated and, of course, I take full responsibility for that as the manager.

"But our job now is to go away and reflect on the season. There is an awful lot of work to do. Our job is to go and fix that and make sure we come back with the motivation greater than ever to push on next season. We have finished in sixth which is where we deserve to finish and we have to start today the climb to get back up again.

"All the supporters connected with Liverpool today will be embarrassed by that and deserve an apology."

Liverpool have spent much of the last 12 months saying goodbye. Good-bye to Luis Suarez; goodbye to Steven Gerrard; goodbye to the Champions League; goodbye to the scintillating football of last season; goodbye to any sense of trust that those in charge of football operations know what they are doing.

They are probably going to say goodbye to Raheem Sterling during the summer, and although Rodgers suggested before the trip to Stoke he was "150 per cent" sure he would not be joining the list of farewells, few are able to fight his corner after this humiliating and shameful afternoon in Staffordshire.

At the Britannia Stadium Liverpool said goodbye to their pride. Mark Hughes's side scored at will in the first half, exposing a team and club that have been sleepwalking since their second-placed finish 12 months ago.

Disgust and disbelief was the response of the fans.

Rodgers's team selection was strange, omitting Sterling from the starting line-up because of his troubled week, but persisting with him as a substitute where he could still incur the wrath of the fans.

Sterling was booed as he strolled past the fans before kick-off. Within 45 minutes all his team-mates were receiving the same venom, only Gerrard spared. The captain did not deserve to be a part of this. What kind of club is he leaving behind? And, more pertinently, how can such wisdom be vacating the premises when we see what those in power consider good enough to be a Liverpool footballer? Gerrard would score a stillation on 70 minutes, applauded by all parts of the stadium. It was a poignant moment but he could not clear this debris as he has done before.

Stoke were ruthless and full of the attacking verve and tenacity so lacking in their opponents, but they must not have believed how easy it was as the mistakes count added up.

Liverpool's set-up was inept. Emre Can was consistently exposed at right back, making Marko Arnautovic seem more like Cristiano Ronaldo. Simon Mignolet pushed Charlie Adam's effort into the gleeful path of Mame Diouf for the first on 22 minutes and mayhem ensued.

Diouf's second should have been stopped by Mignolet, and the errors continued when Can headed directly to Jon Walters six yards out. He scored on the second attempt.

Lucas claimed the assist for the fourth, gifting Adam with an opportunity on the edge of the box on 42 minutes.

Then Steven N'Zonzi had the freedom of midfield to score a fifth before half-time, and Peter Crouch ensured the last word would not be Gerrard's late on.

It is goodbye to this pitiful season for Liverpool.

For Rodgers? He must hope FSG believe he has enough credit in the bank from last year. Given the speed with which the owners removed Roy Hodgson and Kenny Dalglish, Liverpool's season of goodbyes may be extended in the summer.

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Gerrard's tortured goodbye sees fans vent fury at Rodgers
 If Steven Gerrard had been searching for adjectives to describe the emotions of his final game for Liverpool then abysmal, lacklustre and shambolic were perhaps not the ones he had in mind beforehand.

Unfortunately for the Liverpool captain, that is precisely how the majority of visiting supporters - minus the expletives - summed up this utter humiliation for Liverpool at the Britannia Stadium yesterday.

Not even a goal from the veteran midfielder in his 710th and final appearance for his boyhood club could provide a crumb of comfort after a truly awful display which left Brendan Rodgers, the Liverpool manager, acknowledging that his job was on the line.

"I accept there will be questions," Rodgers said. "I've always said if the owners want me to go, I go. I still feel I have a lot to offer. There is an awful lot of work to do and our job is to fix that. My pride makes me want to be in this job. I love the job and I love the club."

Liverpool sustained their biggest Premier League defeat here, and their worst since a 7-2 loss to Tottenham in April 1963, as Stoke ruthlessly exposed the inadequacies of Rodgers and his players.

This was the kind of inept afternoon that will inevitably raise serious questions from supporters about whether Rodgers has lost the support of his players and is the right man to lead the Reds forward.

The wrath Rodgers incurred from angry Liverpool fans as he walked towards the tunnel at half-time with his side 5-0 down left the Northern Irishman in remorseful mood afterwards.

"To start with it's an apology to the supporters," Rodgers added. "We are embarrassed and the supporters deserve an apology. I take responsibility. The supporters have every right to be angry. They have been brilliant for us so we can have no complaints. The fans were angry at half-time and rightly so because that was awful."

Liverpool suffered defensive lapses at the back with mistakes galore, while in midfield and up front, spearheaded by a Philippe Coutinho and Adam Lallana as a pair of 'false' nines, their play lacked clear direction, invention and focus. Of course, that should take nothing away from Stoke who, despite having little to play for, were motivated and aggressive. The result was that they demolished the lacklustre visitors in a clinical manner.

The Stoke striker Mame Biram Diouf opened the scoring when he capitalised on Liverpool keeper Simon Mignolet's fumble to smash home from close range, and added a spectacular second from long range.

A needless header back across goal by Emre Can allowed Jonathan Walters to bundle in a third before a Charlie Adam got the fourth and Steven N'Zonzi arrowed in the fifth from distance.

While there was turmoil on the pitch Rodgers hid contract rebel Raheem Sterling on the bench - perhaps worried he did not need to spice tensions up further after a tumultuous week for the England forward. Who could blame him for leaving after that? "I felt there were others players better mentally positioned to be in the game, it was as simple as that," Rodgers added.

With 20 minutes left Gerrard latched on to Rickie Lambert's flick-on and netted his 186th goal for the club with an angled finish which drew a standing ovation from all four sides of the ground. It was a bittersweet strike he will remember for all the wrong reasons.

However, Stoke had the final word and heaped more misery on Liverpool when Diouf, still with bags of energy, crossed from the right flank late on for substitute Peter Crouch to head home.

"I'm sure Steven wasn't anticipating that would be the manner of his last game," said the Stoke manager, Mark Hughes, after his side had finished with 54 points - their best Premier League haul.

"We couldn't have asked for a better finish to a great season. The level of performance in the first 45 minutes was exceptional."

Gerrard was the last Liverpool player to trudge off the pitch at full-time, almost too embarrassed even to acknowledge those supporters that who stayed behind to wave goodbye.

Whether Rodgers also has to say his farewells this summer remains to be seen.



RED SURRENDER

PERFORMANCES like these get managers sacked.

All week, Brendan Rodgers had been insistent Liverpool's end-of-season review was "merely routine", and far too much had been made of it.

He may now have to reconsider that position.

In fact, he may actually have to consider his position as manager, such was the depth of humiliation his side suffered here in the first half against a rampant Stoke.

In more than 25 years covering the Reds, I cannot recall a more disgraceful half than the first 45 minutes here - nor a more abject surrender - when they were bulldozed by five unanswered goals and their biggest loss since 1963.

Perhaps the previous worst half of football - in the Ataturk Stadium back in 2005 - inspired the best moment of Steven Gerrard's career.

This was the lowest point of his football life, on his final game for the club.

The Anfield hero had never lost a game by more than four goals.

Until now, in his final match - and it is criminal how he was betrayed by his team-mates.

He was the only Reds player to show he cared, the only one who fought and offered resistance.

When he scored in the second half - to inspire a touching standing ovation all round the ground from the Stoke fans - he ran back to the halfway line gesturing his team-mates showed the same urgency, in a haunting reminder of his actions in the Champions League final a decade ago.

Except the scoreline was 5-1 by then - and it would be laughable to think this team could produce even a fraction of the spirit of that night.

You wonder, if they are capable of producing anything at all. Which grimly suggests that Liverpool's owners have big decisions to make in their review.

Their policy of trying to cut wage costs and develop promising young talent has not worked this season, so they must decide whether to adapt that policy, or look for someone else to interpret it.

In defence of Rodgers, it is hard to imagine any manager delivering much more than sixth place with a team that has effectively played without a centre-forward for virtually the entire campaign.

They bought poorly last summer, and he can not be held solely responsible for that. If he is to stay, then he must be given the green light to bring in more experience this time around, and more leaders. If he is to go, then they need a miracle worker.

The lack of leadership beyond Gerrard was painfully evident from the start, and the big surprise was it took a Stoke team full of aggression, menace and desire 22 minutes to open the scoring when Simon Mignolet palmed a Charlie Adam shot into the path of Mame Diouf.

The Potters went on to blow Liverpool away.

Diouf added a second with a fine shot from distance and the floodgates opened. It was like the tide washing away sandcastles as the Reds collapsed, exposing the lack of defensive ability from full-backs Can and Alberto Moreno and the lack of fight from both centre-halves.

It was Can who gifted the third when he headed a cross back across his own six-yard box for Jon Walters to convert, Mamadou Sakho and Lucas who handed over the fourth when Adam robbed the Brazilian to shoot into the corner, and the fifth was supplied by the rampant Steven Nzonzi.

It is pointless describing the second half, save Gerrard's goal and the wonderful reaction from the fans, because it meant nothing, not even when sub Peter Crouch got an inevitable late header against his old club.

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Rodgers reign hits new low in final day thrashing

Brendan Rodgers' Liverpool reign hit a new low as his side were thrashed 6-1 by Stoke City in their final Premier League game of the season.

At the end of a miserable campaign, the Reds saved their worst until last, conceding five times without reply in the first half at the Britannia Stadium.

Steven Gerrard, on his last appearance before moving to LA Galaxy, pulled a goal back after the break, but his side conceded a sixth late on, ensuring their worst defeat in any competition since April 1963.

For Rodgers, this is rock bottom. The manager was jeered by a section of his own supporters as he left the field at half time, and will now face an uncomfortable few days, as he prepares for his end-of-season review with the club's American owners. He will have a job on his hands to explain this performance away.

The first story of the day had emerged an hour before kick off, with the news that Raheem Sterling would be starting the game on the bench.

The forward's ongoing dispute with the club, amplified this week by comments made by his agent, seemed to have forced Rodgers' hand, though he could easily argue that Sterling's form as a starter in recent weeks has not been particularly impressive in any case. Sterling, as it happened, never even took to the field.

It meant Liverpool began without even an auxiliary striker, with Philippe Coutinho operating as a false nine, as he had done with some success against Newcastle earlier in the season. Elsewhere, there was a welcome return for Mamadou Sakho, replacing the hapless Dejan Lovren, and for both Joe Allen and Lucas, who started in midfield.

It was an ex-Liverpool midfielder, Charlie Adam, who had the first shot of the game, four minutes in, but his 25-yarder flew over the bar.

It took 12 minutes for Liverpool to have their first effort, Coutinho off target on his left foot after turning Erik Pieters inside out.

Adam Lallana, lively early on, went closer soon after, but again missed the target. Liverpool were then punished at the other end in the 21 minute as Simon Mignolet was unable to hold Adam's effort, and Mame Biram Diouf was on hand to bury the rebound from close range.

If that was bad, things were to get worse within four minutes, as Diouf grabbed his second, collecting Marko Arnautovic's pass and firing a shot from the edge of the box that seemed to go through Mignolet's hands and into the middle of the goal.

Disaster. And it would reach new levels before the half hour, as Stoke added a third. Jon Walters scored it, heading home at the second attempt, after Emre Can's inexplicable header had left him free in front of goal. An ugly goal, in keeping with this ugliest of ends to Liverpool's season.

They could have had a penalty when Ryan Shawcross clipped Lallana in the box, but Anthony Taylor waved away the appeals.

And to rub salt in the wounds, Stoke got a fourth before half time through Adam. Lucas failed to control a ball in midfield, and the Scot strode forward to steer a shot inside the near post from 20 yards, as the Liverpool fans behind the goal rubbed their eyes in disbelief. They could have been forgiven for walking out there and then.

Plenty did a minute before half time, as Stoke incredibly grabbed a fifth through Steven Nzonzi, who ran unchallenged through the midfield to curl home a beauty from 25 yards. Rodgers, taunted by the delirious home fans, stood dumbfounded in his technical area.

Rodgers replaced Moreno with Jordan Ibe at half time, as his side sought to salvage even a modicum of pride from a damaging day.

At least Asmir Begovic, the Stoke keeper, was called into action after the break, denying Lallana and Gerrard in quick succession. At the other end, a last-ditch block from Jordan Henderson denied Arnautovic a sixth goal.

Gerrard was not far away with a 25-yard curler, but he would get his goal soon after, latching onto a flick by Rickie Lambert, the substitute, and beating Begovic coolly one-on-one for his 186 Liverpool goal. The Stoke supporters, generously, joined in the spontaneous round of applause which followed.

Stoke's players, though, were not so generous, and ensured they had the last word, via former Liverpool man Peter Crouch. The substitute was given the freedom of the penalty area to head home Diouf's left-wing cross.

STOKE CITY (4-2-3-1): Begovic, Cameron, Shawcross, Muniesa (Wilson 71), Pieters, Nzonzi, Whelan, Walters (Odemwingie 67), Adam, Arnautovic (Crouch 77), Diouf
 Not used: Butland, Wollscheid, Sidwell, Ireland

Cards: Adam, Whelan, Shawcross, Pieters

Goals: Diouf (22, 26), Walters (30), Adam (40), Crouch (86)

LIVERPOOL (4-4-2 diamond): Mignolet, Can (Toure 46), Skrtel, Sakho, Moreno (Ibe 46), Lucas, Henderson, Allen (Lambert 69), Gerrard, Lallana, Coutinho

Not used: Ward, Lovren, Markovic, Sterling

Cards: Lucas, Skrtel

Goals: Gerrard (70)

Referee: Anthony Taylor

Attendance: 27,602

The Sentinel

Stoke City 6, Liverpool 1

Diouf (22,26), Walters (30), Adam (41), Nzonzi (45), Crouch (86); Gerrard (70) OUTRAGEOUS, gloriously outrageous, there's no other way to describe events in the first 45 minutes at the Britannia Stadium.

Final-day fixtures throw up all kinds of weird and wonderful sights, but Liverpool losing 5-0 at half-time simply never happens. But while they had Steven Gerrard for one last game, Stoke had 10 Steven Gerrards during a blistering 23-minute spell of goalscoring. The only pity was that Andy Wilkinson wasn't fit enough to play what would have been his last game for the club because even he'd have fancied his chances of a first goal since Primary School.

And if we are being really greedy, an 8-0 victory might have been poetic justice for that 0-8 against Liverpool some 15 years ago. The goalscoring roll call began with two for Mame Diouf and a third for Jon Walters before fine shots from Charlie Adam and Steven Nzonzi for 5-0 at half-time. Gerrard had the goal his career deserved to make it 5-1, but then Peter Crouch stepped off the bench to score with a record-breaking 47th header in the Premier League.

And along the way Stoke broke or matched one or two records by:

* Equalling their best win (6-1) over Liverpool back in 1897

* Hitting six for the first time since 1987 en route to a biggest-ever Premier League victory * Finishing with a positive goal difference for the first time in the Premier League

* Becoming the first team to hit six past Liverpool in a league game since 1963 Breathless stuff which had one proud club shaking its head in victorious disbelief and another burying theirs in their hands in miserable embarrassment. Stoke, with Asmir Begovic's return in goal their only change, took just 75 seconds to remind Gerrard this was no testimonial to his career as Glenn Whelan caught him late to leave the England legend slumped on the ground. Adam's determination to overshadow his old Liverpool team-mate was soon evident, too, when latching onto a loose ball before striding goalwards and striking firmly a yard over the bar with Stoke's first attempt.

Adam's enthusiasm earned him the day's first booking when he over-ran the ball and so was left stretching, and following through, as he shot and Martin Skrtel blocked at close quarters. Not that Skrtel was generating much sympathy. The mood turned a little feisty as Lucas and Whelan complained about their bookings, while Alberto Moreno over-egged a bang to the head from Adam... the already booked Adam.

Adam Lallana deftly teed up a shot across goal to send Begovic sprawling for the first time as Liverpool laboured at times in the first half against the home side's diligent defences. They certainly had nothing to match Stoke's 22nd minute breakthrough as Diouf netted his 11th and easiest goal of his Premier League season. Marko Arnautovic's tenacity out on the left was rewarded when the ball broke for Adam to shoot goalwards and for Simon Mignolet to then spill diving to his left. Diouf couldn't believe his luck as he seized on the loose ball to lash into the roof of the net for 1-0. And the dosage was repeated in similar fashion just four minutes later when Arnautovic was again instrumental on the left-hand side. This time he cut out the middle man by supplying Diouf directly and the Stoke striker smashed his shot so powerfully from the edge of the area that Mignolet's flimsy hands were no match. The Britannia was catching its breath somewhat when Walters, miffed that Diouf should pull two goals clear of his season's total, cashed in on yet more trauma for Emre Can.

Not content with being given the run around by Arnautovic, the troubled right back headed Adam's right-wing cross back towards his own goal for Walters to pounce. His initial shot was blocked at close quarters by Mignolet, but the ball sat up for Walters to head over Liverpool's unguarded goal-line for 3-0 with half-an-hour not quite on the clock. The visitors were eyeballing the referee for a penalty six minutes later when Geoff Cameron caught Lallana, but their protests fell on deaf ears. All we were missing was a goal for Charlie.

And there was an inevitability about his big moment in the 41st minute when Lucas, under pressure from Adam, took possession uncomfortably deep inside his own half and relinquished it almost as quickly.

Adam, like a predator looking at his first dinner in days, rapidly eyed up the possibilities before cracking a left-foot beauty past Mignolet's optimistic dive to his left. They were still dancing in the aisles when Nzonzi, quite unbelievably, made it 5-0 with Stoke's fifth in a period measuring just about 23 minutes.

Nzonzi gathered in oceans of space just inside the Liverpool half before accepting their invitation to power goalwards before unleashing a terrific effort from just outside the area which had Mignolet, yet again, diving more in hope than expectation. A remarkable first half might have ended with a Gerrard goal, but his free-kick cannoned into the wall to provide him with a painful reminder of his club's simply traumatic first 45 minutes. Brendan Rodgers, a presumably shellshocked Brendan Rodgers, tried to address his team's woeful defensive display by whipping off both of his full backs for the start of a second half devoted purely to damage limitation. The second period could only be an anti-climax compared to the first, surely, but the relatively mediocre offering was doing nothing to silence a rampant home crowd on this day of days.

Liverpool's best chance to break their deadlock came and went when Lallana sprung clear and saw his shot smothered superbly by Begovic just after the hour. And Gerrard's day didn't improve much either when his low shot, which lacked

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power and conviction in truth, was touched round his near post by an attentive Begovic.
 The action then switched in the blink of an eye as Stoke sought 6-0 when Diouf broke clear from half-way, but his eventual pass to his left lacked pace and so Arnautovic had every excuse when his shot was deflected into the Boothen End. Gerrard was to have his moment after all in the 70th minute when running onto a flick-on before shooting across the advancing Begovic and into an empty net. And how wonderful to see and hear the whole of the Britannia Stadium rise to applaud his very last Liverpool goal in this his 710th appearance. Gerrard had one more indignity to witness, however, as Diouf centred from the left on 86 for an unmarked Crouch to head home against his old club. A sad day for Gerrard, one made all the sadder by Stoke's monstrous victory.

MATCH STATS

POSSESSION

Stoke 45%, Liverpool 55%

GOAL ATTEMPTS

Stoke 15 (9 on target), Liverpool 13 (4 on target)

CORNERS

Stoke 3, Liverpool 9

FOULS

Stoke 13, Liverpool 4

THE REFEREE

A Taylor (Cheshire) 6

CARD WATCH

YELLOW - Stoke: Adam (foul,8), Whelan (foul,15), Shawcross (foul,45),

Pieters,(foul,77). Liverpool: Lucas (foul,14, Skrtel (foul,48).

RED - Stoke: none. Liverpool: none.

THE CROWD

Attendance: 27,602.

MATCH RATING

Entertainment: 10



Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard endured a nightmare send-off in his final game for the club as Stoke embarrassed the Reds with five first-half goals at the Britannia Stadium.

Stoke scored three in eight minutes, Mame Biram Diouf netting a brace and Jonathan Walters also on target.

Ex-Liverpool midfielder Charlie Adam made it 4-0 from 20 yards before Steven Nzonzi added the fifth from 25 yards.

Gerrard got one back before substitute Peter Crouch headed Stoke's sixth.

This was no way for a player of Gerrard's stature to bow out.

The Los Angeles Galaxy-bound midfielder managed to mark his 710th and final appearance for the Reds with a 186th goal.

But the 34-year-old was badly let down by his team-mates who were out-classed and out-witted from start to finish.

Liverpool finish the season sixth in the table, enough to secure a Europa League third qualifying round spot.

But boss Brendan Rodgers, who dropped young forward Raheem Sterling to the bench after he turned down a new contract, clearly has his work cut out this summer to rebuild his team.

In contrast, Stoke end a productive campaign ninth in the table after a thumping win.

Mark Hughes's rampant side showed no mercy as they easily swept aside Liverpool in an astonishing first-half display.

Diouf opened the floodgates in the 22nd minute after Simon Mignolet parried Adam's powerful drive into the striker's path.

It was 2-0 four minutes later, Diouf letting fly from the edge of the area after being afforded far too much time and space.

Liverpool looked shell-shocked when Walters made it 3-0 on the half hour after poor defending by Emre Can allowed the Stoke striker to pounce from close range despite Mignolet's best efforts.

The Reds were a shambles, Adam making it 4-0 after pouncing on a mistake by Lucas Leiva to power home from 20 yards.

It was Steven Nzonzi's who came up with the goal of the game, the French midfielder making it 5-0 from long distance on the stroke of half time.

Rodgers sent on Kolo Toure and Jordon Ibe in an effort to tighten up the defence at the start of the second half.

Gerrard did manage to mark his last game with a goal after a composed low finish.

But another Liverpool old boy restored Stoke's five-goal cushion as Peter Crouch headed home just five minutes after coming on as a substitute.

At the end, Gerrard could not wait to get off the pitch after a miserable farewell appearance.

Stoke City manager Mark Hughes:

"We couldn't have asked for a better finish to a really great season.

"The level of performance in that first 45 minutes was exceptional and I don't think it reflects badly on Liverpool. I think most teams would have struggled to cope with the quality and intensity of our play.

"It is a great performance against a very good team with great individual talents, and we have been able to get the level of performance that I think a lot of people sensed we were capable of.

"Everything came together and we showed what a good side we are."

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Full time Match ends, Stoke City 6, Liverpool 1.
 90:00+3:03 Full time Second Half ends, Stoke City 6, Liverpool 1.
 90:00+2:36 Attempt missed. Adam Lallana (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is close, but misses to the left. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
 90:00+0:34 Foul by Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool).
 90:00+0:34 Glenn Whelan (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 87:05 Foul by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool).
 87:05 Erik Pieters (Stoke City wins a free kick on the left wing.
 85:33 Goal scored Goal!Goal! Stoke City 6, Liverpool 1. Peter Crouch (Stoke City header from the centre of the box to the bottom left corner. Assisted by Mame Biram Diouf with a cross.
 84:00 Attempt saved. Peter Odemwingie (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Charlie Adam.
 80:07 Substitution Substitution, Stoke City. Peter Crouch replaces Marko Arnautovic.
 79:03 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Lucas Leiva.
 76:59 Booking Erik Pieters (Stoke City is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 76:46 Jordan Henderson (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 76:46 Foul by Erik Pieters (Stoke City).
 75:37 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from the left side of the box is too high. Assisted by Jordan Ibe following a corner.
 75:18 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Geoff Cameron.
 70:51 Attempt saved. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Rickie Lambert.
 70:43 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
 70:41 Substitution Substitution, Stoke City. Marc Wilson replaces Marc Muniesa because of an injury.
 70:22 Delay in match Marc Muniesa (Stoke City because of an injury.
 69:20 Goal scored Goal!Goal! Stoke City 5, Liverpool 1. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box to the bottom left corner. Assisted by Rickie Lambert with a headed pass.
 68:42 Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Rickie Lambert replaces Joe Allen.
 68:20 Attempt missed. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is close, but misses the top right corner. Assisted by Jordan Ibe.
 67:08 Adam Lallana (Liverpool wins a free kick on the right wing.
 67:08 Foul by Marko Arnautovic (Stoke City).
 66:43 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 66:43 Foul by Ryan Shawcross (Stoke City).
 66:24 Substitution Substitution, Stoke City. Peter Odemwingie replaces Jonathan Walters.
 65:49 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Jordan Henderson.
 65:47 Attempt blocked. Marko Arnautovic (Stoke City right footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Mame Biram Diouf.
 65:04 Attempt saved. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from the right side of the box is saved in the bottom right corner. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
 65:04 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Asmir Begovic.
 63:19 Attempt saved. Adam Lallana (Liverpool left footed shot from the centre of the box is saved in the top centre of the goal. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.
 57:09 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.
 55:14 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Jonathan Walters.
 47:53 Booking Martin Skrtel (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 47:50 Foul by Martin Skrtel (Liverpool).
 47:50 Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City wins a free kick on the right wing.
 47:13 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Asmir Begovic.
 47:02 Attempt blocked. Jordan Henderson (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Joe Allen.
 45:00 Second Half begins Stoke City 5, Liverpool 0.
 45:00 Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Jordan Ibe replaces Alberto Moreno.
 45:00 Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Kolo Touré replaces Emre Can.
 45:00+3:05 Half time First Half ends, Stoke City 5, Liverpool 0.
 45:00+2:37 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Marc Muniesa.
 45:00+2:34 Attempt blocked. Steven Gerrard (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
 45:00+1:46 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 45:00+1:46 Foul by Geoff Cameron (Stoke City).
 45:00+0:43 Booking Ryan Shawcross (Stoke City is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 45:00+0:38 Alberto Moreno (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
 45:00+0:38 Foul by Ryan Shawcross (Stoke City).
 44:12 Goal scored Goal!Goal! Stoke City 5, Liverpool 0. Steven N'Zonzi (Stoke City right footed shot from outside the box to the top right corner. Assisted by Marko Arnautovic.
 43:03 Offside, Stoke City. Ryan Shawcross tries a through ball, but Mame Biram Diouf is caught offside.
 40:57 Goal scored Goal!Goal! Stoke City 4, Liverpool 0. Charlie Adam (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box to the bottom right corner.
 39:12 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
 38:56 Delay in match Jonathan Walters (Stoke City because of an injury.
 35:47 Joe Allen (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 35:47 Foul by Marko Arnautovic (Stoke City).
 35:07 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
 35:07 Foul by Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City).
 34:06 Attempt blocked. Charlie Adam (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Jonathan Walters.
 33:28 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Marc Muniesa.

33:21 Attempt blocked. Jordan Henderson (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
 32:54 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Ryan Shawcross.
 32:27 Steven Gerrard (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 32:27 Foul by Erik Pieters (Stoke City).
 29:54 Goal scored Goal!Goal! Stoke City 3, Liverpool 0. Jonathan Walters (Stoke City header from very close range to the bottom right corner.
 29:52 Attempt saved. Jonathan Walters (Stoke City left footed shot from the centre of the box is saved in the centre of the goal.
 28:29 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Ryan Shawcross.
 27:54 Steven Gerrard (Liverpool wins a free kick on the right wing.
 27:54 Foul by Marko Arnautovic (Stoke City).
 25:28 Goal scored Goal!Goal! Stoke City 2, Liverpool 0. Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City right footed shot from outside the box to the top left corner. Assisted by Marko Arnautovic.
 23:31 Offside, Liverpool. Philippe Coutinho tries a through ball, but Jordan Henderson is caught offside.
 21:29 Goal scored Goal!Goal! Stoke City 1, Liverpool 0. Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City right footed shot from the centre of the box to the high centre of the goal.
 21:27 Attempt saved. Charlie Adam (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box is saved in the bottom right corner. Assisted by Marko Arnautovic.
 18:14 Attempt missed. Adam Lallana (Liverpool left footed shot from the right side of the box is close, but misses to the left. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
 17:50 Attempt missed. Charlie Adam (Stoke City left footed shot from more than 35 yards misses to the right. Assisted by Glenn Whelan.
 15:53 Foul by Charlie Adam (Stoke City).
 15:53 Alberto Moreno (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 15:23 Booking Glenn Whelan (Stoke City is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 14:46 Foul by Glenn Whelan (Stoke City).
 14:46 Adam Lallana (Liverpool wins a free kick on the left wing.
 13:28 Booking Lucas Leiva (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 13:19 Jonathan Walters (Stoke City wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 13:19 Foul by Lucas Leiva (Liverpool).
 12:41 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool left footed shot from the right side of the box is high and wide to the left. Assisted by Steven Gerrard.
 11:33 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Erik Pieters.
 9:36 Attempt missed. Jonathan Walters (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box misses to the right. Assisted by Mame Biram Diouf.
 8:34 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Lucas Leiva.
 7:24 Booking Charlie Adam (Stoke City is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 6:53 Martin Skrtel (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 6:53 Foul by Charlie Adam (Stoke City).
 6:50 Attempt blocked. Charlie Adam (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box is blocked. Assisted by Steven N'Zonzi.
 4:14 Attempt missed. Charlie Adam (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box is just a bit too high.
 1:14 Foul by Glenn Whelan (Stoke City).
 1:14 Steven Gerrard (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 0:00 First Half begins.
 0:00 Lineups are announced and players are warming up.