

Date: 22 May 2011
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Mail
Telegraph	Independent	Mirror
Echo		



22 May 2011

THE TIMES

Liverpool fail to find final push

Aston Villa 1
 Downing 33
 Liverpool 0

Referee: L Probert. Attendance: 42,785

If actions speak louder than words then for all Liverpool's vows of determination to qualify for the Europa League, their performance on the final day of the season and accompanying loss to Aston Villa suggested the desire of Kenny Dalglish's team to do so fell some way short of their public pledges.

Ultimately, Villa's longing to finish a difficult campaign on a high was stronger than their opponents' craving to take their place in European football's second-tier competition. Liverpool may have a tradition of continental conquest but such was their acquiescence in defeat and so meek their response to going behind to Stewart Downing's first-half goal that it seemed a decision has been taken, albeit probably subliminally rather than intentionally, that they can do without Europe for one season.

Tottenham Hotspur's victory over Birmingham City ensured that Liverpool would have been unable to leapfrog their North London rivals even had they recorded a win at Villa Park, but apart from a period in the second half when they threatened to get back on level terms they never looked likely to take three points from this game.

Dalglish blamed fatigue for Liverpool's inability to win and the poor start they made to the season under Roy Hodgson for their failure to make the European places for the first time since 1999. In both respects the case he made was a good one but he would not be drawn on whether or not it would be advantageous to have fewer fixtures to play next season.

"It's always nice for everybody to be involved in Europe," the Liverpool manager said. "Do we know whether it's going to be helpful or not to be out of it? It's a long time since this club has not been in Europe, so it's new ground for everybody.

But we have to accept that we are. We didn't qualify for Europe not because of this game but because we had a bad start to the season. When you start as bad as that you are lucky to finish sixth."

For the Villa supporters, this was a day of celebration, not at their own club's achievement at finishing in the top half of the table after being dogged by relegation fears for much of the season, but by the failure of Birmingham to beat the drop.

Throughout the second half, events on the pitch were secondary to those elsewhere as the scoreboard at the junction of the Holte End and Trinity Road Stand became the focus of fans' attention as the story of the demise of their city rivals was told in a series of goal flashes that provoked steadily increasing choruses of delight.

Downing's goal - a beautifully taken half-volley from Marc Albrighton's right-wing cross, described by Gary McAllister as "a fantastic finish" - was almost incidental in comparison. But it did serve to underline his emergence as Villa's most productive player, regardless of the claims of Ashley Young who left the field waving to all four sides of the ground, a gesture that seemed to indicate he was saying farewell even though McAllister insisted otherwise.

"I think people were thinking that [substitution] was staged but it wasn't goodbye and we are still going to try and keep him," the Villa caretaker manager said.

"Ashley still has a year on his contract and he is still an Aston Villa player but we know that there is interest in him. For us, we've finished the season on a bit of a high because three or four months ago we were at the other end of the table."

Young is one of Liverpool's top targets for the summer as they seek players who can provide the kind of service upon which Andy Carroll might thrive. The forward was absent yesterday because of a knee problem which will cast yet more doubt on his involvement in England's squad for this summer's European Under-21 Championship in Denmark.

"Andy's not been able to sustain any reasonable time in training and it would have been irresponsible of us to bring him," Dalglish said. "We played him last week but it was unfair on him. I didn't think we should risk the boy's fitness."

Aston Villa (4-1-4-1): B Friedel 6 - K Walker 6, J Collins 6, R Dunne 6, L Young 6 - S Petrov 6 - A Young 7 (sub: M Bradley, 89min), F Delph 5 (sub: M Albrighton, 28 7), N Reo-Coker 6 (sub: G Agbonlahor, 68 6), S Downing 8 - D Bent 7. Substitutes not used: A Marshall, R Pires, E Heskey, C Clark. Booked: Reo-Coker, Collins.

Liverpool (4-2-3-1): J M Reina 6 - J Flanagan 7, J Carragher 7, M Skrtel 6, F Aurelio 6 - Lucas Leiva 6, J Spearing 5 (sub: J Shelvey, 12 6) - D Kuyt 6, R Meireles 6, J Cole 4 (sub: D Ngog, 68 6) - L Suarez 7. Substitutes not used: P Gulacsi, D Wilson, C Poulsen, A Wisdom, J Robinson. Booked: Meireles, Cole.

the guardian

Downing leaves Liverpool out of steam and out of Europe

Liverpool will not be playing in the Europa League next season after all. They needed to better Tottenham Hotspur's result at home to Birmingham City if they were to sneak fifth place, so a 1-0 defeat was never going to be enough to book a tour of the Euro-periphery. Aston Villa deservedly won a match played at end-of-term pace.

"I think we ran out of steam and out of players," said Kenny Dalglish, after a defeat that ensured Liverpool's absence from European competition for the first time in 12 years. "But we've not failed to qualify because of today. We've not qualified because we had such a bad start to the season."

On a generally demob-happy afternoon the opening minutes saw Villa Park treated to the sound of Gerard Houllier's name being sung - albeit by the supporters in the visitors' section, which included the injured captain, Steven Gerrard. Rumours that Houllier might reappear after recovering from illness proved optimistic. Instead it was Gary McAllister who sent out the home team in a Christmas tree-style formation, with Stewart Downing and Ashley Young on the flanks behind Darren Bent.

After a sleepy start the first chance arrived on 14 minutes, Young hacking Martin Skrtel's header from a corner off the line. After that Villa dominated possession, with Downing demonstrating the elegant, direct running that helped secure him the Villa fans' player of the year award. Downing it was who scored the winning goal, blasting a bouncing ball into the roof of the net from a narrow angle on the left after Marc Albrighton's teasing cross from the right.

The second-biggest cheer of the afternoon arrived seven minutes into the second half, with the news that Birmingham had gone behind at Tottenham. With the spectre of a cut-price Euro-tour in retreat, Liverpool woke up. On the hour Luis Suarez left Kyle Walker and James Collins on the turf with a single jink and played in Raul Meireles. His low shot was well saved by Brad Friedel.

Meireles and Lucas Leiva controlled the midfield for much of the second half, but it was Villa who went closest, on 77 minutes, when Gabriel Agbonlahor failed to connect with Bent's cross in front of an open goal. All that remained was for Young, who has been strongly linked with a move to Liverpool, to leave the field in stoppage time to a mutual ovation that suggested a fond farewell.

"We're going to try and keep him," McAllister said afterwards.

Asked about Young and Downing, Dalglish was poker-faced. "I couldn't tell you about their players. I was watching our own," he said. He also promised that any signings would be highly selective.

Man of the match Stewart Downing (Aston Villa)

Date: 22 May 2011
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Mail
Telegraph	Independent	Mirror
Echo		



22 May 2011

The Mail

Downing spoils the Pool party

Aston Villa 1

Liverpool 0

While his legweary players limp for the sun beds, Kenny Dalglish already has the air of someone who cannot wait for next season.

Whatever the Liverpool manager really thinks about the kudos or otherwise of the Europa League, there will be no noisy European nights at Anfield for the first time since 1999.

It seems almost churlish to suggest the team faltered in the final straight considering the job that Dalglish has done in his 18 games in charge. Yet it is a fact that two of the Scotsman's five Premier League defeats have come in the final two games -- at home to Tottenham and, yesterday, at Villa Park.

On an afternoon when Gerard Houllier resisted the temptation to pop in to say 'bonjour' to friends past and present, his players bid an ideal farewell to an eventful campaign.

Stewart Downing, who swept the boards at the club's awards night last week, has been an ever-present this season to add consistency to his undoubted talents.

The England winger's seventh league goal of the season was one to relish, as he made a perfect connection to Marc Albrighton's cross which squeezed past Pepe Reina after 33 minutes.

Dalglish grumbled about a foul seconds earlier which had gone unnoticed by referee Lee Probert but he did not seem convinced. He had a better case for complaint later when a shot from Raul Meireles seemed to have been saved by defender Richard Dunne although Brad Friedel was acclaimed the hero by the sell-out Villa crowd.

Dalglish, however, conceded that his team, watched by Steven Gerrard with the visiting fans, simply ran out of steam.

Some players did not even make the trip -- most significantly Andy Carroll, who is still recovering from a knee injury and is not expected to be called up to the European Under 21 Championship squad by Stuart Pearce today.

Villa have also clawed their way from relegation trouble to a creditable ninth during a season which has seen players and management fall out. Houllier, recovering from a heart problem, will talk to the board this week and one item on the agenda will be trying to keep Ashley Young.

The player, coveted by Manchester United and Liverpool, appeared to be saying his goodbyes when he was substituted. Not so, according to stand-in manager Gary McAllister.

'People were thinking it was staged but his calf was screaming,' said McAllister. 'He was not waving goodbye because we will try to keep him. We know there is interest in him but maybe a couple of signings will help.'

MATCH FACTS

ASTON VILLA (4-5-1): Friedel 7; Walker 7, Collins 7, Dunne 7, L Young 7; Downing 8, Delph 6 (Albrighton 27min, 7), Reo-Coker 6 (Agbonlahor 67, 5), Petrov 6, A Young 7 (Bradley 90); Bent 7. Subs not used: Marshall, Pires, Heskey, Clark. Booked: Reo-Coker, Walker.

LIVERPOOL (4-4-1-1): Reina 6; Flanagan 6, Carragher 6, Skrtel 7, Aurelio 7; Kuyt 6, Lucas 7, Spearing 5 (Shelvey 12, 6), Cole 5 (Ngog 67, 5); Meireles 8; Suarez 7. Subs not used: Gulacsi, Wilson, Poulsen, Wisdom, Robinson.

Booked: Meireles, Cole. Man of the match: Stewart Downing. Referee: Lee Probert 7.

The Daily Telegraph

Dalglish is confident of attracting new players

Aston Villa 1

Downing 33

Liverpool 0

Att: 42,785

To Aston Villa, the spoils and the regional supremacy that secures pole position in the Midlands quartet of clubs. To Liverpool, zilch, not even the tepid consolation of a Europa Cup place: that now belongs to Tottenham Hotspur.

A telling finale, too, when the loudest cheer of this muted affair was reserved for the White Hart Lane team whose defeat of Birmingham City condemned Villa's second city rivals to relegation.

Any crumb of comfort, even the misery of neighbours, currently suf–fices for the claret–and–blue fans.

Doubtless a period of reflection before a summer of regeneration lies ahead at Villa Park and Anfield although delving back further, nostalgia devotees will recall how, 30 years ago this month, both these teams overwhelmed domestic and European football. Villa were First Division champions as Liverpool claimed their third of five European Cups when Alan Kennedy's goal beat Real Madrid in Paris. A year later and Villa would take over that mantle.

Three decades on and the erosion has been acute even if Kenny Dalglish, a Liverpool player in that 1981 final, has restored some semblance of order. Yet not since 1999 and a lastday reverse to Bradford City have Liverpool failed to qualify for Europe.

"There's a lot more players who don't play in it [Europe] than do," said Dalglish when discussing new signings. "Liverpool Football Club is a big enough attraction to players.

"But we didn't not qualify for Europe because we lost today. It's because we had a bad start to the season," he added, a direct criticism of the brief reign of Roy Hodgson, whom he replaced in January.

Now, having signed a three–year contract, Dalglish's second managerial coming at Anfield should at least establish stability.

There were precious few signs of the revival he has inspired yesterday though the injured Steven Gerrard was spotted among the travelling throng from Merseyside.

The visitors were striving to extend an unbeaten league sequence at this venue dating back to 1998 but that seldom appeared likely after Villa scored. Darren Bent began the move and as Liverpool failed to clear Marc Albrighton's cross, Stewart Downing smacked in a left–foot volley.

Liverpool raised their game after the interval and should have levelled when Luis Suarez teed up a chance for Paul Meireles whose feeble shot was saved by Brad Friedel.

SEASON VERDICT

Aston Villa Finishing as top dogs in the Midlands will not compensate for a desperately disappointing season 5/10

Liverpool Despite progress since Kenny Dalglish returned, this is a campaign best forgotten by Merseysiders 6/10

Date: 22 May 2011
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Mail
Telegraph	Independent	Mirror
Echo		



22 May 2011

THE INDEPENDENT

Dalglish rues lost Europa spot

The biggest cheers of the afternoon greeted the snaps of news from White Hart Lane, which would piece by piece confirm the demise of Birmingham City. It did not help the mood of the Liverpool manager, Kenny Dalglish, as he contemplated his side's failure to cap their revival under his stewardship with a place in the Europa League next season.

That honour, dubious though it may be in Harry Redknapp's mind, will now go to Tottenham, who effectively clinched fifth place when they won at Anfield last week.

Dalglish made three changes, introducing Joe Cole for his first start for more than two months. The England international took his place alongside fellow midfielder Raul Meireles and defender Fabio Aurelio with Glen Johnson, Maxi Rodriguez and Andy Carroll not even on the bench.

But for long periods Liverpool still looked flat, as if the momentum that carried them from 12th place to the fringes of the European qualification places since Dalglish was installed had drained away.

Villa struggled to find a higher gear themselves in a scrappy first half but a goal in the 33rd minute, splendidly taken by the England winger Stewart Downing gave them the edge.

It came after both sides had been forced into changes by injury, with Jonjo Shelvey on for Jay Spearing after a challenge by Nigel Reo-Coker had left the latter limping heavily. Fabian Delph, meanwhile, had given way to Marc Albrighton and it was the Villa youngster who supplied the cross from which Downing scored. It was probably meant for Darren Bent but it beat everyone except Downing, at the far post, who controlled the ball and fired home from a narrow angle off the the crossbar.

An injury to Jamie Carragher posed further problems for Dalglish, although the defender returned from treatment with a bandaged head.

Liverpool came close to equalising when Aurelio's bending free-kick only just evaded a diving Martin Skrtel at the far post but it was not until the second half that the visitors threatened to leave with any reward. But their best attempt was defied by a superb save from Brad Friedel. Luis Suarez pulled the ball back for Dirk Kuyt, who struck it with venom. Richard Dunne threw himself across Friedel's line of vision and Liverpool shouted for handball, but it was Friedel's hands that kept the ball out.

MATCH FACTS

Substitutes: Aston Villa Albrighton (Delph, 28), Agbonlahor (Reo-Coker, 68), Bradley (A Young, 89) Unused Marshall (gk), Clark, Pires, Heskey
 Liverpool Shelvey (Spearing, 12), Ngog (Cole, 68). Unused Gulacsi (gk), Wilson, Wisdom, Robinson, Poulsen. Booked: Aston Villa Reo-Coker, Walker. Liverpool Meireles, Cole.

Man of the match Downing.

Match rating 6/10.

Possession Aston Villa 59% Liverpool 41%.

Attempts on target Aston Villa 8 Liverpool 4.

Referee L Probert (Wiltshire). Att 42,785.

DAILY MIRROR

DOWN AND OUT KENNY; Dalglish missing Stew already after Euro KO
 A VILLA 1 ASTON VILLA: Friedel 7, Walker 6?, Dunne 8, Collins 7, L Young 6, Downing 7, Delph 6 (Albrighton 28, 7), Petrov 7, Reo-Coker ?? (Agbonlahor 68, 7), A Young 7 (Bradley 89), Bent 6. Goal: Downing 33

LIVERPOOL 0 LIVERPOOL: Reina 6, Flanagan 6, Carragher 6, Skrtel 6, Aurelio 6, Lucas 6, Meireles 6?, Spearing 6 (Shelvey 12, 6), Cole 5? (Ngog 68, 6), Suarez 7, Kuyt 6. REFEREE: Lee Probert ATTENDANCE: 42,785

STEWART DOWNING showcased his talents to Liverpool manager Kenny Dalglish as both clubs get ready for major summer rebuilding.

England winger Downing scored his eighth goal of the season with a fine finish to ensure Aston Villa, remarkably, bade farewell to what has been a dismal season for them in ninth place.

And the star's goal and display will only increase Dalglish's determination to secure his signature.

The Anfield club have their work cut out to prise Downing from Villa because the Midlands club already look set to sell Ashley Young.

Young was subbed in the closing stages to a standing ovation with Manchester United heading the queue for the contract rebel. How Liverpool could have done with either man to inject some creativity into their side, which was missing crooked stars Steven Gerrard and Andy Carroll.

Defeat means sixth-placed Liverpool missed out on a Europa League place after back-to-back defeats to finish their campaign.

Those setbacks have taken the gloss off Dalglish's recent appointment on a full-term basis.

But with more funds at his disposal in the close-season, courtesy of the club's new US owners, Dalglish and Reds fans can look forward with optimism.

Successive wins over Arsenal and Liverpool are, however, unlikely to be enough to persuade Villa owner Randy Lerner to stick with boss Gerard Houllier.

The Frenchman was again absent from Villa Park yesterday after his recent heart scare.

And Lerner is expected to bring in a new manager in the weeks to come once doctors confirm Houllier is advised not to return to work. Villa's season has lurched from crisis to crisis since Martin O'Neill quit last August - just five days before the start of the campaign.

They have since endured an injury pile-up, calls for Houllier to quit and various bust-ups involving star players.

But their display and top-10 finish, while their local rivals Birmingham were relegated at Spurs, delighted fans.

They were the better team against Liverpool despite a slow start when Dirk Kuyt had a shot cleared off the line. Villa grew into the contest eventually and captain Stiliyan Petrov saw a fiercely struck low shot blocked.

Fabian Delph went off injured, but his replacement, the very promising Marc Albrighton crossed from the right for Downing to score at the back post.

Downing took the ball down well and slammed his shot high into the net in the 33rd minute.

Villa were worth the advantage after finishing the first half strongly and they were applauded off by their fans.

Liverpool improved after the break and nearly equalised in the 63rd minute. Kuyt released Luis Suarez, who did brilliantly to cut the ball back from the byline.

But Villa keeper Brad Friedel somehow scrambled the ball clear with a superb save to his left from Raul Meireles.

Pepe Reina still needed to make another good save from Petrov though, and there were few complaints from the visitors about the defeat.

Young's withdrawal minutes from the end saw the player, entering the last year of his contract, applaud all four sides of the ground in what looked like a farewell. But even the prospect of losing one of their major stars could not dampen the delight of the home crowd, celebrating a first Villa Park win over the Reds since February 1998 - and the Birmingham's drop into the Championship.

Dalglish, heading into his first summer transfer window, has plenty to ponder. Stewart Downing may be one of the answers.

Date: 22 May 2011
 Opposition: Aston Villa
 Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Mail
Telegraph	Independent	Mirror
Echo		



22 May 2011



James Pearce on a disappointing end to a rollercoaster Reds campaign THE party was only just getting started as Liverpool made a quick exit. The delirium spreading across Villa Park at news of arch rivals Birmingham City being relegated was in stark contrast to the frustration and disappointment etched on the faces of the visiting players.

This wasn't the way they wanted to sign off. It was a flat finish to a roller-coaster campaign. Defeat rendered Liverpool's interest in events at White Hart Lane irrelevant as their push for fifth place fell short. For the first time since 1999/2000 the Reds won't be playing European football next season. Passports can be tucked away when the new campaign begins and Kenny Dalglish's men will only have domestic action to concern themselves with. For a club synonymous with triumphs on the continent it will leave a gaping hole in their fixture list.

But there will be no tears shed over missing out on the Europa League. No July trips to Macedonia, no Thursday nights on Channel Five, no half empty stadiums entertaining dismal opposition and no glut of Sunday fixtures as you play catch-up in the league. After all the Reds played 14 games in the Champions League's poor relation this season and how many are still lodged in the memory banks? Aside from Steven Gerrard's hat-trick against Napoli there were precious few highlights. Liverpool need to focus on getting back to rubbing shoulders with Europe's elite rather than the also-rans. The chances of them achieving that next season are improved by not having an uninspiring distraction.

Back in 1999/2000 when the Reds didn't have Europe to contend with they finished fourth having been seventh 12 months earlier. A similar improvement has to be their target.

Having come so far and set such high standards since the appointment of Dalglish in January, the hunched shoulders at the final whistle yesterday were understandable. After smashing five past Fulham a fortnight ago, it's hard to believe the Reds didn't score another goal or pick up a point.

Momentum has been dented in the home straight but when the dust settles everyone involved will come to realise what an achievement sixth place is Just remember where Liverpool were back on January 5. Outfought and outplayed by a severely depleted Blackburn side, they were a rudderless mess.

Talk of a relegation battle was being entertained by a manager out of his depth, while belief was being sucked away by every crushing setback.

Liverpool are now a very different beast. Dalglish has successfully halted the Reds' decline with unity and stability restored. The foundations are in place to take the club forward and now the hard work really starts.

Finishing the season with back to back defeats has at least underlined to owners Fenway Sports Group the rebuilding job that needs to be done this summer.

If Dalglish is going to realise his ambition of creating another dynasty he's going to need to spend big. A left-back, another centre-back, at least one winger and a back-up striker are urgently required.

His silver tongue will be vital as Liverpool try to attract top class talent without the promise of European football. Reds target Ashley Young appeared to be saying goodbye when he was substituted late on yesterday but will his next stop be Anfield or Old Trafford?

The manager is at least safe in the knowledge that the only reason players will leave Anfield in the coming months is because they aren't wanted. With so much dead wood floating around and flops returning from loan spells, Dalglish has his work cut out ridding the club of other people's mistakes.

If the boss was putting Joe Cole in the shop window by handing him a first league start since January at Villa Park, it's unlikely his phone will be red-hot today. The former Chelsea man underlined why he's been relegated to the role of expensive bench warmer. His attitude is faultless but the reality is that injuries have taken their toll and for long periods games seem to pass him by.

Whether he's still at Anfield come August will surely hinge on whether someone is willing to match his six-figure weekly salary. Cole struggled but he wasn't the only one as Liverpool looked like a side with nothing to play for.

In fairness their cause wasn't helped by the loss of Jay Spearing inside 12 minutes. He tried to battle on after being the victim of a reckless challenge from Nigel Reo-Coker but had to admit defeat and was replaced by Jonjo Shelvey.

The Reds briefly flickered into life with Lucas Leiva seeing his shot hacked off the line by Ashley Young but for the most part this was dour end of season fare.

Defensively, they were solid enough. Jamie Carragher, forced off to have stitches in a head wound, maintained his excellent form to nullify the threat of Darren Bent. Carragher has been an inspirational leader in the absence of Steven Gerrard, who watched on from the away end yesterday. Alongside him, Martin Skrtel has played every minute of every league game this season and has grown in stature in recent months. If a centre-back is bought this summer it will be to provide cover for those two with Daniel Agger's fitness an ongoing concern and Sotirios Kyrgiakos likely to depart. The game's defining moment came 12 minutes before the break. Fabio Aurelio gave substitute Marc Albrighton too much space and his deep cross was lashed in off the underside of the bar by Stewart Downing.

The Reds improved in the second half as they gave more support to the previously isolated Luis Suarez and they wasted a glorious chance to equalise just past the hour mark.

Dirk Kuyt set Suarez clear and he unselfishly squared for Raul Meireles. The Portugal international should have buried it but a combination of Brad Friedel and Richard Dunne somehow kept the ball out. Half-hearted penalty appeals for handball against Dunne were waved away.

Aurelio sent a 20-yard free-kick curling just wide before Suarez spurned two chances you would expect him to bury.

It was Liverpool's first defeat at Villa Park since 1998 and the players tossed their shirts to the travelling fans before leaving Villa to celebrate wildly at Birmingham's expense.

The challenge now is to ensure next May there's a party going on the Reds are invited to.

ASTON VILLA (4-4-1-1): Friedel; L Young, Dunne, Collins, Walker; Downing, Reo-Coker (Agbonlahor 68), Delph (Albrighton 28), Petrov; A Young (Bradley 89); Bent. Not used: Marshall, Pires, Heskey, Clark.

LIVERPOOL (4-2-3-1): Reina; Flanagan, Carragher, Skrtel, Aurelio; Spearing (Shelvey 12), Lucas; Kuyt, Meireles, Cole (Ngog 68); Suarez. Not used: Gulacsi, Wilson, Poulsen, Wisdom, Robinson.

GOAL: Downing (33).

CARDS: Booked – Reo-Coker, Walker; Meireles, Cole.

REFEREE: Lee Probert (Gloucestershire)

ATTENDANCE: 42,786