

Date: 9 August 2015
 Opposition: Stoke City
 Competition: League

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9 August 2015

THE TIMES

Coutinho cracker lights up day of redemption

Stoke 0 Liverpool Coutinho 86 1

Referee A Taylor Attendance 27,654 For 85 minutes, this was a back-to-basics kind of performance from Liverpool, back at the scene of last season's humiliation, but Philippe Coutinho simply does not deal in basics. His goal was typical of his particular brand of football sorcery -- a spectacular, audacious piece of improvisation entirely out of keeping with the drudgery that had gone before. Coutinho's party piece -- a characteristic turn, followed by a shot that curled and dipped beyond Jack Butland in the Stoke City goal -- turned a satisfying afternoon for Brendan Rodgers and Liverpool into a rewarding one. Eleven weeks after Rodgers and his players endured a walk of shame to the players' tunnel, in front of their supporters, this time they were enthusiastically cheered off.

This was nothing like the kind of expansive football that was associated with Liverpool in Rodgers' first two seasons in charge, but the third campaign was so disappointing, culminating in that calamitous 6-1 defeat at the Britannia Stadium, that he was delighted by the more prosaic qualities that underpinned this performance. "It certainly feels better than 11 weeks ago," the Liverpool manager said afterwards. "That [the 6-1 defeat last May] was a one-off game, a unique game really. I knew it was a one-off, but it still happened and you have to be better and be more resolute. That was our work over the course of pre-season, making sure that our defensive organisation and our pressing were better. The supporters at this club, the minimum they want to see is effort and commitment. They've seen that today. To get a win here, after where we were 11 weeks ago, I thought it was an outstanding collective performance."

"Outstanding" would be pushing it, but it was certainly more resolute. Their back four -- Nathaniel Clyne, Martin Skrtel, Dejan Lovren and Joe Gomez, making his Barclays Premier League debut at the age of 18 -- was far more compact than last season. Lovren, so erratic last term, finally showed something of his Southampton form, even if Mark Hughes, the Stoke manager, was entitled to question Anthony Taylor's decision to show a yellow card, rather than red, when the defender elbowed Mame Biram Diouf in the second half. Hughes felt that Stoke deserved a point. They were by far the more impressive team in the first half, with Marco van Ginkel and Ibrahim Affelay making encouraging contributions, but they did not do quite enough to expose any sense of vulnerability in the opposition ranks.

For the first half-hour or so, with Stoke imposing themselves in midfield, Liverpool's defenders were under pressure. There were a couple of short back-passes chased down by Diouf, putting Simon Mignolet under pressure, while Charlie Adam should perhaps have scored when he was set up by Van Ginkel in the eighth minute. Usually such a clean striker of the ball, Adam sliced his shot and Lovren cleared the danger. Stoke's best chance fell to another former Liverpool player, Glen Johnson, as half-time approached. Gomez did well for the most part, but he misjudged a diagonal ball near the touchline, allowing Jonathan Walters to escape down the right-hand side and release Van Ginkel. Lovren got a foot to the cross, which was half-cleared by Skrtel and, when Affelay's volley was mis-hit, it fell to Johnson, who made space for himself in a crowded penalty area but then put it over the crossbar.

It was not an auspicious first 45 minutes for Liverpool, looking to rebuild following the summer departures of Steven Gerrard and Raheem Sterling, but their new-look midfield, with Jordan Henderson at its base, began to settle down after the interval. Where they fell down, for much of the game, was in trying to get Jordan Ibe and Adam Lallana, their two wingers, and James Milner and Coutinho close enough to Christian Benteke. They certainly played in a more direct style at times, looking to get the ball forward to Benteke, but that can only work if they get players forward in support. Liverpool did not muster so much as a shot on target until the 63rd minute, when Butland was tested by Lovren. As the game went on, though, they won more of the individual battles and became more comfortable, particularly once the introduction of Emre Can, in place of the ineffective Lallana, allowed Coutinho to move further forward. Almost immediately Coutinho turned away from Johnson and dribbled into the penalty area, only to be crowded out. Suddenly Stoke had something to worry about. Benteke had a shot blocked and Skrtel tested Butland with a header from James Milner's corner, but there was still a feeling that this game was drifting towards a goalless outcome until Coutinho's spectacular intervention. Receiving the ball from Gomez in the inside-left channel, the Brazilian turned away from Steve Sidwell, created space for himself, running from left to right, and sent a looping, swerving shot into the net from 25 yards. Butland might feel that he should have done better, but he is not the first goalkeeper to have been beaten like that by Coutinho. Nor will he be the last. Coutinho had tried something similar seven minutes earlier, only to hit a wild shot that almost reached the back of the stand. It was at that point that Rodgers, as he freely admitted, thought about replacing the Brazilian -- still not yet fully match-fit, having made only one pre-season appearance since his Copa America exertions -- with Danny Ings. That really would have been back to basics, but, even on an afternoon like this, which Rodgers felt called for substance over style, it felt worth persisting with Coutinho.

As Hughes said afterwards, sometimes it is the quality of the player that makes a difference. Stoke have their share of potential match-winners these days and they hope to add another one now that Xherdan Shaqiri, who was in the crowd yesterday, seems to have decided it might not be quite such a step down from Inter Milan after all.

If Shaqiri proves even half as effective in the Premier League as Coutinho, another talented maverick whom Inter were happy to sell, then Stoke will have got themselves a bargain.

ratings Stoke City (4-2-3-1): J Butland 6 -- G Johnson 6, G CaMeron 7, M Muniesa 8, E Pieters 7 (sub: P Wollscheid, 46Min 7) -- G Whelan 7, C AdaM 6 (sub: S Sidwell, 78) -- J Walters 6, M van Ginkel 6, I Affelay 6 (sub: P OdeMwingie, 78) -- M B Diouf 6. Substitutes not used: S Given, S Ireland, Joselu, P Crouch. Booked: Affelay, AdaM.

Liverpool (4-1-4-1): S Mignolet 7 -- N Clyne 7, M Skrtel 7, D Lovren 8, J GoMez 6 -- J Henderson 6 -- J Ibe 6 (sub: R FirMino, 78), J Milner 6, P Coutinho 7, A Lallana 5 (sub: E Can, 63 5) -- C Benteke 6. Substitutes not used: A Bogdan, K Toure, A Moreno, D Ings, D Origi. Booked: Skrtel, Milner, Lovren, GoMez.

the guardian

Liverpool grateful to Philippe Coutinho for turning the tables on Stoke It was an extraordinary moment to settle such an ordinary match and, for Liverpool a goal which should have therapeutic effects bearing in mind that the last time they played at this ground Brendan Rodgers had set off for the tunnel at the final whistle looking like a man on his way to the guillotine.

Philippe Coutinho's brilliantly taken winner, struck from fully 30 yards, will not expel the memories of that 6-1 drubbing when Steven Gerrard's final match for the club turned into the kind of harrowing ordeal a man with his history could scarcely have thought plausible. Yet it does help the process of recovery. When Coutinho took aim, four minutes from the end of a hitherto bland and directionless match, the game had been plodding aimlessly towards a point when the Liverpool supporters behind Jack Butland's goal could have been forgiven for feeling startled by their team's lack of refinement. Coutinho had clearly tired of all the mediocrity and when he collected the ball in the middle of the pitch and suddenly changed speed, driving forward and putting himself within his favourite range, it was the first burst of real penetration and attacking intent there had been in the entire match. His accuracy from distance is a formidable weapon for Liverpool, particularly when he is moving slightly infield, left to right and aiming for the top corner, and the shot was struck with a wonderful mix of power and precision. It was the arc of the ball, starting high and then taking a sudden dip, that took it past Butland, even though Stoke's goalkeeper managed to get his fingertips to the ball. Coutinho had always been the most likely player to bring some light to a grey match and that was the moment when the entire mood surrounding Liverpool shifted and some of the pressure on Rodgers was released. At the same time, it should not entirely disguise the fact that the football from both sides had been numbing until that point. Liverpool are still, on this evidence, an awfully long way short of where they were a couple of seasons ago, and for long spells it was not entirely easy to see how they are planning to close the gap on the top four. They are still working out how to play to Christian Benteke's strengths and Adam Lallana cannot expect to keep his place when he operates with so little effect. Jordan Ibe flickered only sporadically and Benteke will need better service from the wide positions if he is to flourish. As it is, the Belgium international looks oddly suited for a team that predominantly likes to come through the middle. Rodgers can be encouraged, though, by the way his side withheld Stoke's early pressure and gradually showed themselves to be the better team in the second half, even if it was indisputable that his players, in keeping with those of their opponents, ought to have taken much better care of the ball. James Milner had a reasonable debut in the centre of midfield and Nathaniel Clyne showed why he should also be a fine acquisition. Just as pleasingly for Rodgers, Dejan Lovren justified his place in the team with one of his better displays. Lovren was fortunate not to be sent off after rattling Mame Diouf's jaw with his elbow in the second half, escaping with only a yellow card despite it being in full view of the referee, Anthony Taylor, but it was an improved performance otherwise. Lovren became a symbol of Liverpool's excesses last season but the £20m signing from Southampton at least offered hope here that he can be the player Rodgers hoped he might be. Stoke will reflect on Glen Johnson's chance in the first half, when the former Liverpool full-back could not control his shot and put the ball over the crossbar after Clyne had blocked Ibrahim Affelay's first effort. Mark Hughes was entitled to complain about Lovren's elbowing offence but the most disappointing aspect for Stoke's manager must be their inability to cause more problems in the final third of the pitch. Their tactic early on was to build on the right, no doubt targeting the 18-year-old debutant in Liverpool's left-back position. Joe Gomez looked what he was at times: young, inexperienced and still acclimatising to the higher level. Overall, though, the former Charlton Athletic player acquitted himself well. Roy Hodgson, the England manager, was in the crowd and will no doubt see him as one for the future. Affelay showed some neat touches and Marco van Ginkel, the loan signing from Chelsea, was predominantly involved during the spells in the first half when Stoke did push their opponents back. Yet the home side seldom showed the ingenuity to get behind their opponents. When the two sides played here 77 days earlier Stoke had racked up a 5-0 lead by half-time, the first time that had happened to Liverpool since 1976, but this time Hughes's attackers had no delicacy around the penalty area. Everything was rushed and that meant Liverpool's goalkeeper, Simon Mignolet, was rarely troubled and Rodgers could set off down the touchline at the end in a very different frame of mind than the last time he made that walk. Man of the match Dejan Lovren (Liverpool)

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The Mail

SAMBA MAGIC LIFTS RODGERS; Coutinho hits stunning late strike to ease the pain of 6-1 thrashing

LIVERPOOL were no doubt thinking of settling. Philippe Coutinho was not. That is what makes him special, the last true star in the firmament at Anfield. Luis Suarez, Raheem Sterling and Steven Gerrard have all gone. Coutinho remains and yesterday he demonstrated the enduring worth of a true match-winner. The game was heading for a stale draw, opportunities limited, Stoke giving as good as they got for most of it, when Coutinho elevated the action to another level. For all of Brendan Rodgers' attempts to reinvent this team, the Brazilian remains its stand-out player for now. John Terry listed him among an exclusive trio of individuals who caused Chelsea's defence real trouble last season, and if Liverpool are to move forward as the owners demand in this campaign it will be Coutinho that is charged with inspiring that progression. Make no mistake, this was a huge result for Liverpool. They have got a cruel opening run of fixtures and this opening game was little short of treacherous, considering how the previous season had ended. Stoke 6 Liverpool 1, in case you had forgotten. So to rerun that match as the season's curtain-raiser must have been a Premier League computer programmer's idea of a joke. Not that Rodgers will have seen the funny side. Yet while it may take some time to live down Gerrard's final game -- 'Scousebusters' read the commemorative scarves on sale outside the ground -- this was most definitely an excellent start. The danger in defeat was obvious. Lose here again, and the pressure would be on from the beginning. Rodgers, being a glass-half-full kind of manager, did not see it like that. The way he viewed it, this was the opportunity for Liverpool to put the past behind them. And in the 86th minute, through Coutinho, they did. He received the ball from teenage left back Joe Gomez, turned and shrugged off the attention of Glenn Whelan. From there, he only had one intention. His burst of pace took him into clean air, and he let rip with a shot from 25 yards. It was his trademark approach to goal, cutting inside from the left, and his trademark finish, a curled shot into the top corner -- but it is a routine that never gets old. It looked a goal from the moment it left his boot, and goalkeeper Jack Butland was powerless. There was no way back for Stoke from there. A fair result? Just about. Liverpool probably did a bit more late in the second half and before that not enough happened to make a call for either team. Stoke had the best, arguably the only, chance of the first half, and Liverpool did not muster one of note until the 68th minute, but both teams have a lot of new players and look as if they need time to bed in. Stoke's Ibrahim Afellay, late of Barcelona, looked the best of the new boys, certainly early on, when he determined to show his new club his range of tricks, earning instant popularity with the locals. Those who use Stoke City as a short-hand term to epitomise typically direct and physical English football will have to find another trope. The revolution Mark Hughes has been working towards since taking over from Tony Pulis at the end of the 2012-2013 season has finally arrived and players such as Afellay are at the heart of it. Yes, he got booked after five minutes, but there the similarity to Stoke's combative past ends. Stoke's football was as ambitious as Liverpool's and while they can still put it about, so can Swansea, and so can Liverpool for that matter, and nobody makes a cliché out of them. Indeed, the worst foul of the game saw Dejan Lovren jab an elbow into the face of Mame Diouf, having first checked his position. It wasn't one of those challenges where the act of jumping lifts an arm, either. Lovren barely left the ground. Anthony Taylor, the referee, issued a yellow card, but it could easily have been red. And while Afellay's boot may have been high on Nathaniel Clyne in the fifth minute, from there his feet were a blur. Stepovers, backheels, exquisite feints and dummies, often delivered at full pace. Clearly, the Dutchman had received no dire briefings about dumbing down for the Premier League. He went out and played his normal game, and fitted in just fine -- well, until getting cleaned out in mid-air by James Milner shortly before half-time. He faded a bit from there, but still completed 90 per cent of his passes in Liverpool's half and 88 per cent overall. By comparison, Liverpool's Adam Lallana was substituted with a 71 per cent pass completion rate. Equally, Liverpool's newbies seemed to find life a little harder than their counterparts. Great pressure comes with that shirt. In the first half, Clyne collected the ball in the centre circle and, with Stoke players closing him down, turned and hit it the length of the field back towards his own goalkeeper. He would have been bolder at Southampton, no doubt -- but responsibility does that to a man. No doubt Clyne was aware of Liverpool's first priority, to avoid another thumping. Perhaps that explains the more obvious caution in their play early on. The best chance of the first half fell to Stoke. Marco van Ginkel beat Gomez and cut the ball back from deep, a deflection causing it to be acrobatically cleared off the line by Martin Skrtel. It fell to Afellay, whose shot was blocked by Clyne's hand, Taylor ignoring the penalty claims and waving play on. Now it was Glen Johnson's turn. He brought the ball under control, but shot over against his former club. It took until the 63rd minute for the home side to threaten again, a Charlie Adam free-kick that Diouf just couldn't get a touch on, Simon Mignolet turning it around late, a save that was more impressive than it looked. The close shave spurred Liverpool into action and in the 68th minute a Milner corner was headed goalwards by Skrtel, kept out by Butland. Soon after, Milner set up another chance for Jordan Henderson, who squandered it with an

inaccurate volley across goal. Bournemouth are next at Anfield in seven days, which would have been a very tense night had Liverpool lost here. Instead, Rodgers will feel confident of visiting Arsenal on August 24 with a 100 per cent record -- and a monkey off his back. Short-term, at least.

The Daily Telegraph

Redemption for Rodgers as Coutinho strike sinks Stoke
 Stoke 0 Liverpool 1 Coutinho 86 Att: 27,654

It is the walk to and from the dugout at Stoke City that will have tormented Brendan Rodgers for the last 77 days. On a bad day, the Britannia Stadium offers no mercy visitors, the away fans strategically positioned within spleen-venting distance by the tunnel near the corner flag. In May, Rodgers and Liverpool's players made an inglorious exit, heads bowed in shame as the fury descended following a 6-1 defeat. It must have seemed a lifetime ago as Rodgers raised his fists and morale to savour this opening-day victory. He witnessed a festival as he took purposeful strides down the touchline at full-time here - the samba party in full swing thanks to Philippe Coutinho's 86th minute winner. The Brazilian delivered a trademark strike from 25 yards to complete the first of what must be numerous exorcisms as Liverpool bury the ghosts of last season. Scowls and recriminations were thus transformed into ovations and elevated expectations. Here were 90 minutes that were as much about the search for redemption as demonstrating fears heading into the campaign are misplaced. It must be said Coutinho's decisive intervention was not in keeping with the game, an untidily largely unfulfilling contest owing more to grit and perspiration than creativity. Rodgers will not care. Nor should he given the scrutiny of his position when he last boarded a coach from this venue. In terms of character and attitude Liverpool had to be unrecognisable. They were. Presumably the pretty patterns will be weaved as the season progresses. Liverpool's Brazilian maestro conjured up the only moment of class to provide the impetus Rodgers needed after so many changes since the last visit. The fact Coutinho was about to be substituted before spinning away from Steve Sidwell and unleashing from 25 yards added to the sense that luck might also be smiling on the Northern Irishman this season. For four of Rodgers's starting XI, there were no demons to slay in Staffordshire. Christian Benteke, James Milner, Nathaniel Clyne and Joe Gomez started. Roberto Firmino took his place on the bench waiting for an introduction in the latter stages. He made a difference when called upon, Liverpool improving in attack as the game progressed having relied heavily on their defenders for an hour. With no specialist defensive mid-fielder, Rodgers opted for attacking idealism over caution. This is his natural character, but the addition of Benteke signalled a notable change. Liverpool hit more long balls in one game than the previous three years, Benteke's aerial prowess evident but too often 50 yards from goal. It caused a powderpuff game which only occasionally threatened to find second gear. The creative trio of Coutinho, Adam Lallana and Jordan Ibe were hunting for imagination as much as sharpness and Mark Hughes's side were as likely to snatch victory. For all the focus on Liverpool's recruits it was the one Stoke took from Anfield - Glen Johnson - who squandered the best chance of the first half. Jon Walters and Marco van Ginkel combined on the right wing, and when Martin Skrtel's clearance failed to avert danger, he was relieved possession fell kindly to Johnson's left foot in the penalty area. By the time Johnson tried to work the ball to his favoured right boot he had skied the chance under renewed pressure. Stoke toiled as much as Liverpool, but they were more threatening for an hour. With Xherdan Shaqiri watching on - presumably assess-ing whether to make a move from Inter Milan - Mark Hughes was not experiencing the Merseyside backlash he'd predicted. Mame Diouf, who scored twice in the 6-1 win in May, was inches from connecting with Charlie Adam's free-kick on 64 minutes. It was that type of game where a set-piece or twirl of the magic wand was needed to settle it. Enter Liverpool's South American conjuror. Coutinho was Liverpool's player of the season last year, the expectation being he will be the next elevated to the status where P50 million bids start being discussed. Three points owed more to those ridiculed last season, however. Dejan Lovren enjoyed his finest game for the club while the P512 million recruit Clyne looks one of the most astute purchases of the Rodgers era. A right back who is first and foremost a canny defender rather than someone with ambitions to be a winger. Gomez made a couple of errors that can be attributed to inexperience - he must stop trying to make clearances across his own penalty area - but otherwise displayed a composure that belied his age. This may not have been a performance to send a warning to the rest of the Premier League, but given what happened three months ago it suggests the contaminated cloud of the past eight months may have lifted. Liverpool have made amends for the final game of last season. Now starts the task of doing the same for everything else that happened in 2014-15.

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Coutinho wonder-goal helps Liverpool move on from May
 It would, quite frankly, have taken only the briefest daub of colour on the canvas of this bleakest of games to give us something by which to remember the day, but in the end, Philippe Coutinho scored a winning goal that should endure right through to the end-of-season montages in May and beyond.

Bravo to the little Brazilian, who scored the kind of goal on 86 minutes that did not just remind us what it is we appreciate about a game that has been in abeyance for the past two months but gave some kind of narrative to an afternoon badly lacking a theme. Up until then, this match had had all the charm of a day spent in traffic on the A50, and then Liverpool's No 10 intervened with a shot of power and surprise.

Before then, Brendan Rodgers' side had cautiously confronted the legacy of that 6-1 defeat at the Britannia Stadium 11 weeks previously which they, and their manager in particular, have had all summer to ruminate upon. The away team were understandably eager that the same fate did not befall them again and while they defended considerably better than on that fateful day in May, there was not much to be said about them going forward.

As for Stoke, contemplating their new squad replete with Barcelona and Real Madrid exiles, this was not really an afternoon that announced a brave new era. They were competent at the back but in front of a reluctant Xherdan Shaqiri, in the stand running the rule over his potential new club, it would be fair to say that the Potters did not exactly seal the deal in that regard.

For their manager, Mark Hughes, there was the bitterness at being beaten by the kind of shot he would hit in the best of his playing days. He made some quietly scathing comments afterwards about the amount Liverpool have spent this summer and the quality one might expect to get for that price. He complained about some of the decisions by the referee, Anthony Taylor, but for all that it did look like the Stoke manager had settled for a draw from 20 minutes out.

Coutinho tore up that possibility with a quite wonderful goal. He was not even facing goal when he took the ball from Joe Gomez, from the left side, rolled off the challenge from the substitute Steven Sidwell, and lashed a shot from 30 yards with such fearsome power that it went through Jack Butland's grasp rather than beyond it. A great goal from a player who could be great one day, and goodness knows Liverpool need one in the post-Steven Gerrard and Raheem Sterling era.

You could tell by the way Coutinho's team-mates were unwilling to let him go without adding their own personal thanks just how much it meant to them. As the survivors from last season tried to exorcise that 6-1 defeat here, the four new boys in the first XI did their best in unfamiliar circumstances. The end result was a struggle to put it all together. At left-back, the 18-year-old Gomez did not look out of place and he earned high praise from his manager. In attack, Liverpool struggled to release Christian Benteke on goal yet he spent the game a frustrated figure, looking to break off the back of a Stoke defence that handled him quite comfortably. Nevertheless, Liverpool got there in the end, although in the first half in particular it was hard to see how they might do it. For all Stoke's hard work in midfield it should also be said they had few decent chances on goal. In the second half there was one for Marco van Ginkel with 10 minutes left, and a free-kick from Charlie Adam that drifted beyond Mame Diouf but they created precious little. As for their manager, Hughes claimed a penalty for a handball by Nathaniel Clyne during a scruffy chance that fell his team's way in the first half. He also questioned why Dejan Lovren was given only a yellow card for a stray elbow that cracked Diouf on the nose and might have merited a tougher punishment. It was a truly forgettable first half of misplaced passes and incompetence on both sides. The goalscoring chances, if there were to be any, looked as if they would come from an error, perhaps Simon Mignolet's erratic kicking or Van Ginkel's occasionally wild passes, but in the end both sides escaped unscathed.

The best chance before the break fell to Glen Johnson, Stoke's new right-back, wearing No 8 and presented with the rare opportunity to put the ball away against his former club. Stoke had sliced Liverpool open down the right side where Jonathan Walters slipped in Van Ginkel.

His cross was flapped away by Mignolet and then Martin Skrtel before it came back to Johnson via Ibrahim Afellay and the handball from Clyne that Hughes later highlighted. Johnson had to adjust his feet and the ball's position before he allowed himself a shot, which was struck without power or placement.

Otherwise it was poor quality, to say the least. Liverpool looked at their most dangerous when Coutinho had the ball and passed it quickly. When he lingered on it, they tended to lose their effectiveness. Benteke was not fed the ball quickly and early, as he likes it, and as a result was notably peripheral.

In the second half the pure tiredness of both sides meant there was greater opportunity in both boxes. On 77 minutes, Coutinho lashed a shot high into the away fans behind Butland's goal and it seemed a matter of time before Rodgers replaced him. The Brazilian has had just three weeks' training after his Copa America exertions and did not travel with the team to Australia in pre-season. Indeed, Rodgers later admitted that he was about to send on Danny Ings before Coutinho found his range so spectacularly. Just before then Roberto Firmino came on for a debut and then there was that wonderful end to the match. Not quite good enough to dispel the memory of the low quality of what had gone before but close enough.



COUT OF THIS WORLD; Brazilian revives Reds to exorcise last-day demons

STOKE CITY 0

LIVERPOOL 1

BACK to the bedlam factory, 77 days on, Liverpool conjured one of the most significant opening-match wins of the Premier League era.

Few managers have ever headed into a new season under the sort of pressure Brendan Rodgers was feeling as he returned to the scene of his grimmest nightmare.

Everything which happened amid the white noise and hostility of the Britannia yesterday was viewed in the context of Liverpool's 6-1 obliteration in Steven Gerrard's farewell match on the final day of the last campaign.

And for 86 minutes it seemed as though Liverpool, quite reasonably, would be content to simply prove their intestinal fortitude and dog out a goalless draw. Then Philippe Coutinho - who had just wellied a shot at least twice as far back as Row Z - swivelled round Steve Sidwell, advanced a couple of paces and curled a 25-yarder beyond Jack Butland.

Rodgers admitted there was an element of luck, that he was about to send on Danny Ings in the place of his majestic Brazilian.

But the strike which sparked joyous mayhem among the Red Army behind the goal will now allow Rodgers to build yet another new team away from the shadow of the noose. The Liverpool manager praised all four of his debutants - Christian Benteke, James Milner, Nathaniel Clyne and Joe Gomez - although perhaps only Milner was an obvious success here.

Benteke, the PS32.5million line-leader, showed glimpses of his ability to hold-up play and bully defenders, but was ultimately frustrated.

Milner, though, was the perfect central midfield presence for this fixture. He has been assured he can establish himself as a box-to-box man at Anfield and he will sweat his wits off for Rodgers all winter.

Stoke may no longer play with the unadulterated ferocity of the Tony Pulis era but this remains a venue immune to the top flight's half-and-half scarf prawnsandwich mentality, a visit to fear.

Mark Hughes was left grumbling about a Dejan Lovren elbow on Mame Diouf which earned only a yellow card and an unrequited penalty claim for handball against Clyne.

He also spoke of his hope of signing Xherdan Shaqiri of Inter Milan, another player capable of moving the Potters on to a different plane.

Shaqiri was here to watch a match which will not have filled him with any great enthusiasm to join the most overhyped sporting league on Earth.

While Liverpool's need to exorcise their shame afforded it a certain tension, this was an absolute stinker almost entirely devoid of goalmouth action. Rodgers is adamant Benteke is far more than just a target man and that the big Belgian can fit into his new boss's purist philosophy.

But Liverpool were more direct than usual yet Benteke's influence was limited. At one point he out-muscled Marc Muniesa and attempted a one-two with Coutinho.

Yet the most striking snapshot of his afternoon was the moment when Benteke openly berated his skipper Jordan Henderson for failing to tee him up when well placed.

Liverpool face each of last season's top five, plus Everton, in their next six away fixtures but have precious breathing space now. They have removed an almighty gorilla from their backs and redeemed themselves in the eyes of their supporters. This was an exercise in exorcism and Coutinho was some ghost-buster.

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Redemption delivered as Reds exorcise Britannia ghosts with dogged victory

Redemption was delivered via the right boot of Liverpool's little magician. Philippe Coutinho turned an afternoon of dogged resistance into one of unbridled celebration with another dazzling addition to his collection of match-winning strikes. The Brazilian's stunning 25-yarder four minutes from time exorcised the ghosts of the Reds' 6-1 thrashing at the hands of Stoke City just 77 days earlier and sent the 2,800-strong travelling Kop into raptures.

Coutinho provided a beacon of light for Liverpool amid the dismal struggles of last season and he got the new campaign off to the best possible start with his late masterclass at the Britannia Stadium. The contrast to the Reds' previous visit to the Potteries back in May was stark. Back then a shell-shocked Brendan Rodgers made his way down the touchline after the final whistle having overseen the club's worst defeat for more than half a century. Anger and vitriol rained down on him from the away end with Rodgers knowing that such a spineless capitulation had left him fighting for his future. This time the Northern Irishman had his chest puffed out and his applause to the jubilant away end was returned with interest. Rodgers had promised to regain supporters' trust by overseeing an Anfield revival and this was a first step in that direction. You could spend all day picking holes in what was a desperately disjointed performance, but crucially Liverpool showcased the kind of attributes they lost during the wretched slump towards the end of last term. There was resilience, spirit and character in abundance. A squad accused of lacking mental toughness when they floundered in the spring dug deep to repel Stoke's advances. But for the beauty of Coutinho's strike this would have been rightly labelled as winning ugly. No-one epitomised that transformation in the camp more than Dejan Lovren, who could hold his head high after a gutsy defensive display. It was a big call by Rodgers to start the £20million Croatian centre-back ahead of Mamadou Sakho but his faith was repaid. Where he spread panic and uncertainty last season, this time Lovren was much more assured and the clean sheet was reward for his efforts.

A summer of sweeping changes at Anfield was underlined by the fact that just five members of Liverpool's line up had started the same fixture back in May. After an £80million spending spree, there were debuts for Christian Benteke, James Milner, Nathaniel Clyne and teenager Joe Gomez, who was referred to £12million Spaniard Alberto Moreno. Roberto Firmino followed later from the bench. After a pre-season when Liverpool travelled 30,000 miles and largely playing sub-standard opposition, this was a team who had never played together before and it showed. The opening 45 minutes were instantly forgettable with neither keeper seriously tested and quality from both sides in short supply.

Stoke were typically robust with Ibrahim Afellay booked early on for leaving his studs on Clyne. But Liverpool matched them for application in all departments with Gomez refusing to be bullied by the combative Jonathan Walters. The ice-cool teenager showed few nerves on his Premier League debut. He was strong in the tackle and the England youth international dealt with most of what the Potters threw at him. The same kind of composure was absent elsewhere as Liverpool repeatedly gave possession away cheaply. Rodgers had rebuffed claims Benteke was simply a target man and insisted the Belgium international would fit into the Reds' slick passing game. However, the temptation to lump it long is always there when the focal point of your attack is 6ft 4ins tall. And too often in the first half Liverpool hammered it aimlessly in Benteke's direction when there were much better options to take. The result was that Benteke was left isolated and feeding off scraps. Stoke looked the more menacing and there was a let-off when Charlie Adam fluffed his kick after Marco Van Ginkel had got away from Coutinho.

After being beaten in the air by Walters, Martin Skrtel was relieved to see Mame Diouf's weak shot easily dealt with by Simon Mignolet. The fact that Liverpool shelved plans to buy a new No 1 keeper this summer was testament to the manner in which Mignolet revived his Anfield career last season. However, for all the improvements he's made in commanding his box and being a more dominant figure, his kicking remains an area of concern. Twice in quick succession he put the Reds under pressure by scuffing clearances as they rode their luck.

The most baffling sight of the first half was Glen Johnson's passable impersonation of Cafu. Nine minutes before the break he should have inflicted some damage on his former club. After Van Ginkel's deflected cross was hacked away by Skrtel, Afellay's piledriver was blocked by Clyne and fell invitingly for Johnson. However, he couldn't sort his feet out and ended up scooping it over the bar. The second half brought more of the same with Liverpool only briefly spluttering into life as an attacking force. Adam Lallana was ineffective and it was no surprise when he made way for Emre Can just past the hour mark.

That change allowed Coutinho to play further forward and the little Brazilian belatedly came to life. A surging run ended with Benteke being teed up but his strike was blocked by Johnson. Butland then clung on to Martin Skrtel's header as the contest began to open up. With time running out, Liverpool looked destined to secure a hard-earned point but Coutinho had other ideas. Turning away from Steve Sidwell 35 yards out, he worked way into space and unleashed a dipping 25-yarder beyond Butland before being mobbed by his team-

mates. The demons have been banished. Liverpool are up and running.

MATCH FACTS

Stoke (4-2-3-1): Butland, Johnson, Cameron, Muniesa, Pieters (Wollscheid 45), Whelan, Adam (Sidwell 78), Walters, Afellay (Odemwingie 78), Van Ginkel, Diouf.

Not used: Given, Ireland, Joselu, Crouch.

Liverpool (4-1-4-1): Mignolet, Clyne, Skrtel, Lovren, Gomez, Henderson, Ibe (Firmino 78), Milner, Coutinho, Lallana (Can 63), Benteke.

Not used: Bogdan, Toure, Moreno, Origi, Ings.

Referee: Anthony Taylor **Goals:** Coutinho 86.

Bookings: Afellay, Skrtel, Milner, Lovren, Gomez, Adam.

Man of the match: Philippe Coutinho. A special strike lit up a drab contest.



AS curtain-raisers to nine months of good action go, that was among the most forgettable.

It's had a few rivals over the years, mind you, not least the slumberfest which opened last season at home to Aston Villa.

And the same result, of course. Disappointingly.

This was never going to be a repeat of that halcyon May afternoon when we slaughtered Liverpool 6-1.

If nothing else, Brendan Rodgers had to ensure his team did not lose.

He came for a draw, sent his substitutes on to secure that point and ended up nicking victory thanks to a piece of genius by their one true world-class player.

You could only appreciate the strike with which Philippe Coutinho won the game. Stoke were rather wasteful in front of goal – Mame Biram Diouf has not yet found his scoring boots, but they will undoubtedly reappear - but were also not awarded the swathes of space from which they scored their hatful three months ago.

And can you believe we were only 50 or so minutes into the new season before everyone's favourite hot topic – refereeing – hit the top of the agenda once again. Liverpool defender Dejan Lovren laid an elbow on Diouf, but Anthony Taylor, who otherwise had a solid game, felt it only worthy of a yellow card.

It was a nailed-on sending-off offence, but once again we saw an opponent given the benefit of the doubt when we all know a Stoke player would most likely have seen red. It would have made the world of difference.

Early conclusions?

Stoke look light defensively due to the various injuries and without Marko Arnautovic and Bojan lacked a tad of invention up front, although looked more likely to score than Liverpool through most of the game.

The team does feel slightly undercooked, although we know all too well that Mark Hughes prepares his team to come strong in the second half of a season.

What would we give for a good start, though. A point here would have been a fair result, to lose was tough. We need to bounce back from this disappointment with a good showing at struggling Tottenham next Saturday, where of course Stoke won last year.

As for the coming weeks, not only do they bring some winnable games, but the last few weeks of the transfer window.

With Stoke having hosted Xherdan Shaqiri at the Brit yesterday we can all keep our fingers crossed that City have pulled off one of the transfer coups of the summer.

In fact, don't just cross your fingers, cross your toes, legs and anything else mobile you have.

This lad can out-Arnie Arnie, will complete the transformation from Triffic Tony's Triers to full-blown Stokelona.

But style matters little if you don't put away those chances.

Date: 9 August 2015
Opposition: Stoke City
Competition: League

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| Times | Telegraph | Echo |
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| Independent | Mail | BBC |

9 August 2015



Philippe Coutinho's stunning long-range strike gave Liverpool a late victory over Stoke on the opening weekend.

The match was a lacklustre Premier League encounter until the Brazilian's magic four minutes from the end.

Former Liverpool man Glen Johnson could have put his new side in front in the first half, but skewed his shot over the bar from 12 yards out.

Charlie Adam's long-range free-kick almost sneaked in at the back post but was pushed away by Simon Mignolet.

It meant Mark Hughes' side ended the campaign with 54 points, their highest total in the top flight.

Despite last season's embarrassing result, Liverpool's owners backed Brendan Rodgers and kept him as manager, so have things improved?

Although victorious this time round, Liverpool have work to do on how to bed together their attacking players.

Christian Benteke touched the ball just five times in the penalty area, and will need to improve as he faces competition from substitute Roberto Firmino - who had a run out in the last 15 minutes - and Danny Ings. Daniel Sturridge will add to the fight for places when he returns from injury next month.

Meanwhile, Stoke are an uncompromising outfit under Mark Hughes, with new boys Ibrahim Afellay and Marco van Ginkel giving extra class to a side who were undone by a special strike.

Afellay was brought in on a free transfer from Barcelona and looks to be a player who will excite the Britannia Stadium crowd. His neat footwork was generously applauded by the fans, while his composure on the ball and attacking prowess will give Stoke extra incentive in the final third.

Liverpool full-backs Nathaniel Clyne and 18-year-old Joe Gomez both impressed, while the experienced James Milner and Stoke's on-loan Van Ginkel showed they are not afraid to scrap in midfield, but also looked assured in possession.

Playing as a lone striker, Benteke endured a poor debut, isolated on his own, often having to drop short in search of the ball. Boss Rodgers needs to work out how to best utilise the £32.5m Belgian's height and aggression. The Reds put just six crosses into the box for him to feed off.

Manager reaction

Stoke manager Mark Hughes: "Liverpool have invested a lot of money this summer but I did not see £80m worth of difference between the teams. We are at a good level without going into the transfer market too much.

"I do not think any team deserved the win, a draw would have been the fair result. We will get stronger and be more creative. In terms of the performance, as this is the first day of the season, I am quietly confident we can go on from this point."

Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers: "To get the win after what happened here last season was even more important. We showed great character and determination as a team and our quality came through.

"I always felt last season's result at Stoke was a one-off. It was a poor day and it was important for us to come here and get a result. The players can put that behind them now and focus on moving forward."

What former Liverpool defenders said

Mark Lawrenson on BBC Radio 5: "It's been a very drab game. Extremely dull - it's been a bit of a dog's dinner at times - but the goal was absolutely top class. The turn on Steve Sidwell was brilliant - that gave Philippe Coutinho the space to run on goal."

Date: 9 August 2015
 Opposition: Stoke City
 Competition: League

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| Times | Telegraph | Echo |
| Guardian | Mirror | Sentinel |
| Independent | Mail | BBC |

9 August 2015



Full time Match ends, Stoke City 0, Liverpool 1.
 90:00+3:18 Full time Second Half ends, Stoke City 0, Liverpool 1.
 90:00+2:03 Christian Benteke (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 90:00+2:03 Foul by Marc Muniesa (Stoke City.
 90:00+0:56 Foul by Christian Benteke (Liverpool.
 90:00+0:56 Marc Muniesa (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 88:46 Foul by Nathaniel Clyne (Liverpool.
 88:46 Peter Odemwingie (Stoke City wins a free kick on the left wing.
 85:24 Goal scored Goal! Goal! Stoke City 0, Liverpool 1. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box to the top right corner. Assisted by Joseph Gomez.
 84:32 Roberto Firmino (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 84:32 Foul by Steve Sidwell (Stoke City.
 83:35 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Nathaniel Clyne.
 81:44 Foul by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool.
 81:44 Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 79:59 Foul by Roberto Firmino (Liverpool.
 79:59 Glenn Whelan (Stoke City wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 79:46 Attempt blocked. Marco Van Ginkel (Stoke City left footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Jonathan Walters.
 77:55 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Stoke City. Steve Sidwell replaces Charlie Adam.
 77:50 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Stoke City. Peter Odemwingie replaces Ibrahim Afellay.
 77:31 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Roberto Firmino replaces Jordon Ibe.
 76:56 Attempt missed. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is too high.
 72:20 Booking Charlie Adam (Stoke City is shown the yellow card.
 68:38 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Nathaniel Clyne.
 67:59 Attempt saved. Martin Skrtel (Liverpool header from the centre of the box is saved in the bottom left corner. Assisted by James Milner with a cross.
 67:34 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Philipp Wollscheid.
 66:50 Attempt blocked. Christian Benteke (Liverpool right footed shot from the centre of the box is blocked. Assisted by Philippe Coutinho.
 64:50 Jordon Ibe (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 64:50 Foul by Ibrahim Afellay (Stoke City.
 63:44 Corner, Stoke City. Conceded by Simon Mignolet.
 62:58 Booking Joseph Gomez (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 62:50 Foul by Joseph Gomez (Liverpool.
 62:50 Jonathan Walters (Stoke City wins a free kick on the right wing.
 62:35 Attempt saved. Dejan Lovren (Liverpool left footed shot from the left side of the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Martin Skrtel.
 62:18 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Liverpool. Emre Can replaces Adam Lallana.
 61:37 Christian Benteke (Liverpool wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 61:37 Foul by Philipp Wollscheid (Stoke City.
 58:24 Foul by Jordan Henderson (Liverpool.
 58:24 Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 57:33 Offside, Stoke City. Marco Van Ginkel tries a through ball, but Jonathan Walters is caught offside.
 55:58 Offside, Stoke City. Glenn Whelan tries a through ball, but Mame Biram Diouf is caught offside.
 52:08 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Glenn Whelan.
 50:59 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
 50:16 Delay in match Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City because of an injury.
 49:55 Booking Dejan Lovren (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 49:33 Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City wins a free kick in the attacking half.
 49:33 Foul by Dejan Lovren (Liverpool.
 45:11 Attempt missed. Marco Van Ginkel (Stoke City left footed shot from long range on the right is close, but misses to the right. Assisted by Jonathan Walters.
 45:00 Second Half begins Stoke City 0, Liverpool 0.
 45:00 Substitution Substitution Substitution, Stoke City. Philipp Wollscheid replaces Erik Pieters because of an injury.
 45:00+2:19 Half time First Half ends, Stoke City 0, Liverpool 0.
 45:00+0:15 Foul by Charlie Adam (Stoke City.
 45:00+0:15 Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 44:47 Attempt missed. Charlie Adam (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box misses to the right. Assisted by Mame Biram Diouf.
 44:09 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
 42:39 Delay in match Ibrahim Afellay (Stoke City because of an injury.
 42:12 Foul by Ibrahim Afellay (Stoke City.
 42:12 James Milner (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 38:58 Booking James Milner (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 38:44 Charlie Adam (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 38:44 Foul by James Milner (Liverpool.
 35:14 Attempt missed. Glen Johnson (Stoke City left footed shot from the centre of the box is too high.
 35:11 Attempt blocked. Ibrahim Afellay (Stoke City left footed shot from the left side of the box is blocked.
 33:59 Charlie Adam (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 33:59 Foul by Jordon Ibe (Liverpool.
 33:19 Delay over. They are ready to continue.
 32:28 Delay in match Erik Pieters (Stoke City because of an injury.
 31:37 Foul by Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City.
 31:37 Simon Mignolet (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 30:29 Attempt blocked. Jordon Ibe (Liverpool right footed shot from the right side of the

box is blocked. Assisted by Nathaniel Clyne.
 27:59 Offside, Stoke City. Charlie Adam tries a through ball, but Jonathan Walters is caught offside.
 27:32 Booking Martin Skrtel (Liverpool is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 27:20 Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City wins a free kick on the left wing.
 27:20 Foul by Martin Skrtel (Liverpool.
 26:19 Erik Pieters (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 26:19 Foul by Jordon Ibe (Liverpool.
 25:19 Offside, Liverpool. Joseph Gomez tries a through ball, but Adam Lallana is caught offside.
 23:35 Foul by Erik Pieters (Stoke City.
 23:35 Jordon Ibe (Liverpool wins a free kick on the right wing.
 21:26 Marc Muniesa (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 21:26 Foul by James Milner (Liverpool.
 20:54 Attempt blocked. Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
 19:20 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Marco Van Ginkel.
 18:58 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Geoff Cameron.
 18:49 Attempt blocked. Adam Lallana (Liverpool right footed shot from outside the box is blocked.
 17:58 Attempt saved. Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City left footed shot from outside the box is saved in the centre of the goal. Assisted by Jonathan Walters with a headed pass.
 14:02 Foul by Nathaniel Clyne (Liverpool.
 14:02 Mame Biram Diouf (Stoke City wins a free kick on the left wing.
 8:48 Offside, Liverpool. Adam Lallana tries a through ball, but Jordon Ibe is caught offside.
 7:35 Attempt missed. Charlie Adam (Stoke City left footed shot from the centre of the box misses to the left.
 6:49 Jonathan Walters (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 6:49 Foul by Joseph Gomez (Liverpool.
 6:33 Foul by Jordon Ibe (Liverpool.
 6:33 Ibrahim Afellay (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 3:56 Booking Ibrahim Afellay (Stoke City is shown the yellow card for a bad foul.
 3:38 Nathaniel Clyne (Liverpool wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 3:38 Foul by Ibrahim Afellay (Stoke City.
 1:46 Foul by Christian Benteke (Liverpool.
 1:46 Glen Johnson (Stoke City wins a free kick in the defensive half.
 1:20 Corner, Liverpool. Conceded by Ibrahim Afellay.
 0:00 First Half begins.
 0:00 Lineups are announced and players are warming up.