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Jonathan O'Neill

Joshua scott

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Alan Waddington

acknowledgements

Many thanks to Roy Henderson, Jonathan Rist, Akif Butt and Stuart Dale for their contribution to the extensive analysis contained within this book.

As ever, thanks to Chris Hadley for the work that went into proofing the final manuscript. Also, thanks to John Lewin for helping find options for the special edition packaging.

Best wishes to Alan Wishart and Kenan Ismet.

Finally, special thanks to Kate for all the love and support.

Published By GPRF Publishing

Printed by Anchorprint.

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First edition published 2009

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*Dedicated to my father,
who 'gave' me football.*

6

introduction

The best points haul for 21 years (86, which would have been enough to win seven of the previous 16 league titles); a thoroughly convincing double over Manchester United; a better goal difference and a greater number of goals scored than any other team; and a club record 13 away wins.

And still only 2nd place, with a points total that has never been bettered by any runner-up in a 38-game season, and the lowest number of defeats for any team that didn't win the league in its 121-year history.

So close—but no cigar, and, alas, no champagne.

Can't Buy Me Leagues?

Can't buy me love, sang Liverpool's most famous sons, in reference to the one thing supposedly untainted by the filthy lucre. (They also sang about semolina pilchards scaling Parisian landmarks, although that's more suited to a book about drug abuse in sport than *financial* doping.)

But *does* money buy you league titles?

More than ever before, financial power seems to be at the root of any assault on the English league championship. So while this book looks at all aspects of Liverpool's season, from performances

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to tactics and off-the-pitch developments, a lot of the themes lead back to money, and how it buys you the power to compete on a level playing field in 2008/09—and, more importantly, beyond. Is there a glass ceiling in the modern era, in that success cannot be achieved without a minimum spend? Certainly the clubs trying to get into the Champions League feel so, but what about those looking to be *champions*?

In *Dynasty*, I looked at the financial wherewithal of successful sides dating back to Bill Shankly's installation as Kop chorister, but this book aims to take that one step further, with more detailed investigation into the modern era, and how the money a club spends affects its chances of winning the biggest domestic prize. Before the top division was rebranded The Premiership, some equity seemed to exist. Cheap, cleverly-assembled sides could win league titles. Teams promoted from the old Second Division could become national champions within a year or two, as seen with Nottingham Forest, Leeds United and, in the Premiership's early years, Blackburn Rovers.

Most people feel that this is no longer the case. And they have a point. It's now fourteen years since a team other than Manchester United, Chelsea or Arsenal won the league. In that time, Liverpool have finished 2nd twice. However, no other team outside of what is currently known as the 'big four' have finished in the top two since Newcastle, in 1997. If it seems virtually impossible that any team can break into the top four —Everton in 2005 being the last gatecrashers —even though only a few points often separate 4th from 5th, then why should Liverpool have been expected to break what was becoming a Manchester United/Chelsea duopoly? Truth be told, Liverpool should not be 'expected' to win the league title, either now or at any time in the past decade. When people talk of Liverpool 'blowing' the chance to win the 2008/09 title having led the table at the mid-point, they were missing the possible inevitability of the situation, which is mirrored in the race for 4th place in previous seasons. In the past four years, either Liverpool or Arsenal have been behind in the race for 4th spot —at times perilously so — but each time that little extra quality saw off Everton, Spurs, Aston Villa and any other high-flying hopefuls

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as the 38th game approached. Did those teams 'blow it'? Or did natural selection —survival of the fittest —abide?

The truth is that Liverpool *should* be expected to be no better than the 4th-best team in England. Based on history, tradition and both the size and spread of the fan-base, this is of course not the case —far from it. Only Manchester United from these shores can rival Liverpool, and even they fall behind in certain areas. But those things —history, fan-base and a magical name —do not win you trophies. Indeed, they can sometimes even be a hindrance. The one undeniably positive thing a rich history does is keep the club as an attractive proposition, but reputation alone does not attract the best players.

In many ways, Liverpool have the right to be considered the *premier* English club, although it's an honour United will obviously feel is rightfully theirs instead. However, based on facts surrounding the club's wherewithal, Liverpool would not rank so highly.

Liverpool's squad was only the 5th-most expensive last season (2008/09). Anfield was the 6th-biggest stadium in the division, although Newcastle have since very kindly vacated one space above the Reds on that particular list, and none of the three promoted sides have grounds that exceed Anfield's 45,362 capacity.

Liverpool, by some distance, paid only the 4th-highest wages in the land. The club's turnover was also only the 4th-highest. These figures are based on the most recently published accounts, which don't include last season, but there will have been no dramatic changes in the interim. As with a lot of the financial figures, Tottenham and Newcastle are actually far closer to Liverpool than the Reds are to Chelsea, Arsenal and Manchester United. Indeed, in some cases, such as squad cost, Spurs are actually ahead of Liverpool. Manchester City also feature highly, ending the season with a considerably more expensive squad than Liverpool.

So where *do* Liverpool match or trump their main rivals, aside from factors relating to its past? How about the passionate crowd, the famed '12th man'? Well, certainly on European nights against the

big names it can be worth a goal head-start. But for league games, Anfield can be rather muted, and sometimes against the smaller

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teams you could hear a pin drop on its soft green turf.

Then there are the managers. Alex Ferguson is hardly some bumbling rookie, while Arsène Wenger is as respected as anyone in the game. Both have been in charge for what seems like forever. Chelsea have recently appointed Carlo Ancelotti, whose record in Champions League finals against Liverpool reads ‘won one, lost one’, but who also won the trophy in 2003 against Juventus. Clearly he’s one of the best around, too (although totally unproven in England), but at least Liverpool can claim to have a manager whose achievements rank alongside each of his main rivals. His career may cover different scenarios and different time-spans, but over the past eight years, Rafa Benítez has earned the reputation of a master, across the continent at least, even if he’s still not as widely respected throughout England.

Which of them is the best manager is hard to say, given their different approaches, wide-ranging budgets and time allocated to building their respective dynasties. (Ancelotti, of course, hasn’t even got started at Stamford Bridge, at the time of writing.)

But that’s about where the equality expires. When it comes to the experience of winning the English league title, Liverpool had just one such player: Jermaine Pennant —who wasn’t even at the club from January onwards, and who has now moved to Spain.

With Liverpool obviously unable to boast anyone winning the title in *their* colours, it’s no surprise to see such a low number, given that those who have done so in the past decade were/are at rival clubs; clubs that are certainly not going to sell directly to the Reds. Even Everton have more Premiership league winners in their ranks, although, of course, their medals were collected at other clubs. The arrival of Glen Johnson brings Liverpool’s tally back up to one.

Five different clubs have won the title since Liverpool last lifted the trophy, meaning that the Reds rank 6th in that particular list. Of course, it's a fairly meaningless list, seeing as not one single player remains from that success, in 1990; the Reds could rank 50th and it not alter anything. But what isn't meaningless is how the teams contesting the league title with Liverpool *do* have this experience, and in the case of two of the three, managers who have masterminded the most successful period in their club's history.

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If experience of having won the competition you're contesting is helpful (and surely it *has to be*, to some unquantifiable degree), then this is another hurdle for the Reds to overcome.

However, despite all the obstacles and handicaps, Liverpool proved themselves genuine title challengers last season. Wherewithal suggests that the Reds should have finished a distant 4th, but instead they came incredibly close to landing the club's first title in 19 years. Why? Liverpool needed to be extremely good, and they were, but what other factors played a part in almost taking the title the wire?

Chelsea's lack of stability at the top left a slight gap to squeeze into, and the Reds took the initiative, even though the Londoners were still strong enough to find themselves just one minute away from their second Champions League Final in two seasons.

Arsenal's inexperience and lack of mettle left a bigger opening, and Liverpool brushed past the Gunners —a team who were still good enough to make it to the Champions League semi-final —by a 14-point margin. Teams who were 30 points ahead of Liverpool when Benítez arrived, and after he'd spent a first season sorting Willy Wheat from Charlie Chaff, were now trailing in the Reds' wake. But it still wasn't quite enough. While the pressure to end a long wait for the title adds a further burden, the *hunger* to do so —and the rewards on offer to the players, as overnight legends

—can make a difference; certainly when compared with Chelsea, whose own burning desire appears directed at Europe, something that may also be true of Manchester United.

The question is, with the wealth pumped into rival clubs from multi-billionaires and the far greater income they generate from much bigger stadia, can *anything* ever be enough?

And if it can be, wouldn't that make it the greatest achievement in the Reds' history?

Part One

2008/09

Chapter One

All Change

It's fair to say that the 2008/09 season did not involve the smoothest of preparations for Liverpool, while the campaign itself didn't unfold without its shocks and surprises, but such has become par for the course in recent times.

Tension that had existed at boardroom level was exacerbated over transfer targets in the summer months, most notably relating to Gareth Barry, with the Aston Villa midfielder's proposed move to Anfield being one of the close-season sagas. Reports suggested that Rafa Benítez had wanted to meet the asking price, but that chief executive Rick Parry, who resigned several months later, vetoed the deal, feeling the fee to be too much to pay.

Xabi Alonso's future seemed inextricably linked to the transfer,

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with Juventus and Arsenal genuinely interested, but failing to match the Reds' valuation. Whether or not Alonso would have been sacrificed for Barry is debatable —with the Villan able to play in at least four different positions, it wasn't a foregone conclusion —but the England international had enjoyed better form in the previous two seasons compared to the more cultured but less mobile Spaniard. As it transpired, Alonso produced the form of his life in the coming twelve months.

One player who did arrive was Robbie Keane, although even then there were rumblings that he was a Rick Parry purchase. Had that been the case, it's unlikely that Benítez would have refrained from resigning, such would have been the devolution of his power. It just makes no sense. But it's clear that the two men were not working hand-in-hand, or seeing eye-to-eye, over transfers, and that sooner or later something (or someone) would

have to give. Having paid almost £20m for Robbie Keane (£19m, with the additional £1.3m in add-ons not activated), the striker failed to settle into either his stride or the side. Within six months he had returned to Spurs, for a fee that should rise from £12m to £15m, and possibly even hit £19m, which helped Liverpool write off the 'mistake' in terms of expense, but not reputation.

A major problem ahead of the season was that the majority of Benítez's squad were on extended Euro 2008 duty or sent to Beijing for the Olympics. While trophy success was a great boost to Fernando Torres, Xabi Alonso, Pepé Reina, Alvaro Arbeloa and (in China) Javier Mascherano, it didn't help their fitness levels, or those of Ryan Babel and Lucas Leiva, who also travelled to the Olympics, when it came to returning to Liverpool. Their preparations were not in keeping with the club's highly-tuned methods, nor were they directed towards the upcoming arduous campaign. In the case of Babel, the winger had been forced out of Euro 2008 with an ankle injury sustained with Holland, but was instead used later in the summer in China. However, the problem was that he hadn't fully recovered from his injury, at least in terms of match fitness, and he would have been much better served recovering with Liverpool rather than being rushed into action for his country.

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Fernando Torres, meanwhile, had played too much high-intensity football in twelve months, with no summer's rest to speak of, and his body understandably wilted under the strain. Gerrard also missed part of pre-season, and underwent a minor operation at the start of the campaign.

Benítez himself spent part of the season under the knife, having to undergo three operations to remove kidney stones. (Soon after, Rick Parry, another reputed pain in his side, was equally swiftly excised.)

Another person who got under Benítez’s skin, and whose skin was very much permeated in reply, was Alex Ferguson, as, from the mid-point of the season onwards, several wars of words erupted, the like of which could have come from the build up to a heavyweight boxing bout. (To continue this metaphor, Liverpool had United on the ropes in March with the most forceful knockdown seen at Old Trafford for 17 years, but United got up to win the overall fight on points.)

Just after Christmas, Steven Gerrard was pasted all over the front of the tabloids for an alleged assault a few hours after arguably his finest-ever showing in a red shirt, as his side crushed Newcastle 5-1. Court cases loomed, and serious charges were levelled —before, a couple of months later, being reduced to those of a far more minor nature.

By the end of the season, reserve team manager Gary Ablett and a whole host of staff from the Academy had been axed, despite the club reaching a third FA Youth Cup Final in four years and Ablett having delivered the reserve league title just a year earlier (although he did far less well in 2008/09).

Benítez was now given the control he desired over the entire footballing operation at the club. He’d seen off former youth boss Steve Heighway in 2007 over differences of opinion, but he didn’t quite have the keys to the Academy yet; they were secured as part of the new five-year contract the Spaniard signed in March 2009. The Academy’s Technical Director, Piet Hamberg, was handed his P45, as was long-serving Hugh McCauley, who had guided the U18 side to the FA Youth Cup Final, but who had delivered precious little talent through to the senior ranks since the ‘90s.

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Speaking a couple of months after signing his new deal, Benítez explained his thinking behind the decision to commit his future to Merseyside. “When I decided to sign a new contract I did it

because Liverpool Football Club is more than a club. It is the heart of the city. It is our life and for the people here it means so much. I thought I had to sign. We have to fight, we have to do it. Every single year, every single week and every single day when you talk with a fan he is supporting you and supporting the team. You can see the passion and it makes a massive difference. Our fans are amazing and when I talk with people in Spain they all say the same. We will see it again when we go to Asia in pre-season. I receive a lot of letters from people talking about the club. And as I said before this is more than a club.”

The New Guard

Joining the ranks at the start of last season were Sammy Lee, who returned to the club after four years away —replacing Pako Ayestaran, who had departed early in the previous season, as assistant manager —and former Argentine centre-back Mauricio Pellegrino, also rejoining the club, this time as first team coach, following a brief stint as a player in 2005 when his influence off the field helped land the European Cup.

John McMahan, younger brother of former midfield terrier Steve, was appointed Gary Ablett’s replacement as Reserve Team Head Coach in June 2009. McMahan had been assistant manager at Shrewsbury Town since 2007, having previously had a career in the lower leagues as a player. Joining McMahan was Antonio Gomez Perez, who had been a player in Real Madrid’s youth ranks when Benítez was in charge, and went on to play for their first team, before spells at Sevilla, Albacete and Toledo. Gomez began working as a coach in Toledo’s youth system in 2003, before moving to take charge of Albacete’s youth side in 2004. Three years later his team won the Spanish National Youth Cup against Valencia. After this he was promoted to reserve team coach, until Benítez moved to bring his former charge to Melwood.

Also joining the reserve coaching setup was former Tranmere

keeper, John Acherberg. In another positive development, Prenton

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Park, home of the Wirral club, will host the reserve team's home fixtures, giving a far better playing surface than the rugby-damaged pitch at Warrington's Halliwell Jones Stadium, and allowing Liverpoolians easy access to the fixtures, particularly after the seconds had also played "home" games as far away as Wrexham. Scouser Frank McParland, who'd left the role of Scouting Coordinator at Liverpool to become General Manager of Bolton while Sammy Lee was there as manager, was one about whom Rafa Benítez was clearly not merely paying lip service when the latter rued the former's exit in 2007. But with Lee fired from the Reebok shortly after, and subsequently back at Liverpool, McParland was again available.

His main role was to assess the performance of the Academy and its staff, the report on which led to the implemented changes. McParland himself was then appointed Academy Director by Benítez in the summer of 2009.

Soon after, Malcolm Elias, Academy Head of Recruitment, left the club by mutual consent. Elias, who helped uncover several outstanding prospects while at Southampton —most notably Theo Walcott —before his move to Anfield in 2007, had helped bring in Lauri Dalla Valle, Chris Buchtman and Andre Wisdom —easily three of the best young players in the youth side. His exit therefore seems a little more surprising than most, but it's clear that Rafa Benítez was demanding perfection from every area of the club. Perhaps the most interesting appointment in 2009 was that of José Segura, who replaced Piet Hamberg as the Academy's Technical Director. Segura had joined Barcelona's youth setup in 2002, and a year later became assistant manager of the club's B side, which competes in the lower divisions of the Spanish league. Players he had helped develop in his two years at the Catalan giants

include Lionel Messi, Andrés Iniesta, Cesc Fabregas, Gerard Piqué and Víctor Valdés, not to mention a certain Luis Garcia. Segura later ended up in Greek football, first as assistant manager at AEK Athens, and then in the same role at Olympiakos. When Takis Lemonis was sacked in March 2009, Segura took charge of the team, leading it to a league and cup double.

At the time of Segura's appointment to Liverpool's Academy, 16

Barcelona were very much flavour of the month —having just dismantled Manchester United so ruthlessly (and beautifully) in Rome —with their success was built on big spending allied to an exceptional record of developing top class home-grown players. The quality, and number of these has meant that although they buy expensive players, the budget doesn't need to be spread across an entire team. Add Xavi and Carlos Puyol, who also excelled in the Champions League Final, to Messi, Iniesta, Piqué and Valdés, and it meant that seven of the eleven starters had come through the ranks at the *Camp Nou*.

One of these, Messi, is neither Spanish nor a Catalan, but had instead been found in Argentina at the age of eleven —a quite wonderful piece of scouting, particularly given his physical problems at the time. The Catalans duly agreed to pay the doctors' bills to help combat the young boy's growth hormone deficiency. Of the starting XI in Rome, only Thierry Henry and Samuel Eto'o were big money signings, for fees that totalled around £40m, with Yaya Touré costing around £7m, and Sylvinho just £1.5m. Of course, many expensive players had been signed over the course of the previous decade, such as Rivaldo and Ronaldinho, but such was the ripeness of those the club had developed, these could be weeded out over the course of a few seasons to leave a greater Catalan flavour.

This is the example Liverpool obviously want to follow. With

far less money to spend than clubs like Chelsea and Manchester City, and being able to generate far less match-day income than Manchester United and Arsenal, Liverpool needs to trade on its name —its reputation —in attracting the best youngsters and, when they develop, being able to spend larger amounts on the one or two extra players the club needs.

The major problem is that Liverpool's youth programme has not produced one player in the past decade capable of getting anywhere near the levels of Barcelona's self-groomed elite. Daniel Pacheco, now 18, has the air of someone capable of making the grade, but even he was snatched from the Barça academy. There are good players making their way through the Reds' system, and Emiliano Insúa looks to be the first youngster fit to be a regular.

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But as yet, nowhere near enough are emerging to justify excessive optimism. And if Liverpool lag behind several clubs in terms of finances, they also clearly fall behind Arsenal in terms of youth development, while even Manchester City have a far better record of producing first-team players in recent years, albeit for a weaker first team (although some of them would certainly improve the squad at Anfield, and Daniel Sturridge has since jumped ship for Chelsea). Manchester United also had a clear head-start in producing their own players, and while they've not developed many special English talents in recent years, they've also scouted the world for some of the globe's most promising youngsters.

Benítez is redressing the balance, but Liverpool are still cast adrift in many areas due to changes that took place at rival clubs before he even arrived in England; be they the introduction of better youth scouting or the finances of new owners. He will hope that, now he has full control of the entire footballing operation, his vision will not be diluted; he will now stand or fall on his own ideas. Without great riches in the past or, so it seems, in the future,

he still won't be able to say that he has his ideal team —too many first-choice targets have been too expensive —but after five years, he's been able to get enough of his preferred signings for the side to be able to play in the manner he requires, with a spine that is the envy of most of Europe.

But even that level of success has brought its drawbacks:

vultures, particularly from Spain, are hovering, looking to pick off the Reds' best players. Any damage to the spine at this stage could take a long time to repair, but two people who certainly won't be eyeing moves are the joint-best players at the club. Steven Gerrard and Fernando Torres both committed themselves to Liverpool by signing improved contracts, with the former having past the point of ever being curious about a move elsewhere, and the latter satisfied that all his desires are being met at a club whose fans love him, and whom he loves in return. Challenging for trophies within a dedicated and professional environment, and not money, are the motivating factors behind their genuine commitment to the Reds.

"I'm very happy with my contract," Torres said in June, "and wouldn't leave just to earn a little more somewhere else where I
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wouldn't be that happy. To want any more would be greedy and that is not me. As long as Liverpool want me, I will stay." His contract runs until 2013, with the option for a further year at the end of that deal, while others —Gerrard, Kuyt, Agger —also signed on the dotted line.

"A lot of players committed themselves to Liverpool this summer with new contracts," Torres said, "and players don't do that unless they think they can have their ambitions met. There is a lot of belief at the club and a lot of trust in the manager. I sincerely believe I will win the Premier League and the Champions League here. The winning tradition is very clear at Liverpool. I want to be involved in a little piece of their history."

Off the pitch, changes continued at pace. With Rick Parry resigning, David Moores also relinquished his place on the club's board, although he retained his role as honorary life president. As executive headhunters Odgers Berndtson underwent a search for a new Chief Executive, Christian Purslow, a season ticket holder at Anfield, was appointed as Managing Director. The club's official statement upon his appointment read: "Purslow will represent the owners and oversee all financial and operational aspects of the club, working with Rafa Benítez on player transfers and with the club's Group Chief Financial Officer, Philip Nash and Commercial Director, Ian Ayre on club and commercial management."

Reports of owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett selling the club continued, especially with their ability to repay loans used to purchase the Reds in question, but by the summer of 2009 they were instead selling their investments in their baseball and ice hockey franchises, suggesting that the money was earmarked for Anfield.

At least the two men themselves were once more on civil terms by the end of the season, and apparently singing from the same song book, having avoided each other in the directors' box during the 2-0 defeat of Chelsea in February.

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"We were shown up. We could not match the Liverpool players. They were better, faster and had more aggression. In terms of international football, Liverpool are superior in every way."

Wesley Sneijder, Real Madrid

Chapter Two

The New Attacking Verve

Perhaps all sides are ‘schizophrenic’ (to use its old, non-PC meaning of ‘a split personality’). They will all have good and bad days, doing things brilliantly when on form, whilst a sticky patch will bring old faults to the fore.

Perhaps Liverpool are more changeable than most teams. Or maybe it’s just the perceptions. A series of 0-0 draws at Anfield mired the fixture list from the first weeks to the late winter, but as the season moved towards its climax, ‘defensive’ Liverpool overtook every other Premiership team in terms of goals scored, racing towards 77 league strikes, the club’s best total for 18 years.

It wasn’t that the team was ‘let off the leash’ —that slightly irritating phrase that suggests a side, straight-jacketed by its manager, that suddenly loses its shackles upon his whim (as if

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it were that easy). The better teams become at the supposedly ‘negative’ side of the game, the more they can attack, safe in the knowledge that it’s not simply going to be a game of chance —the ‘we might win 4-3, but we might lose 9-3’ chaos that some very attractive sides have laboured under. It’s fair to say that Liverpool themselves entered such a chaotic phase come spring, with 4-4 draws against Chelsea and Arsenal, but these were the exceptions that proved the rule, with extenuating circumstances.

Controlling games, keeping things tight at the back, can provide a creative springboard, and the 2008/09 season was testament to Liverpool’s progress in terms of this balance. In many ways, goal difference is a brilliant indicator of just how good a team is over the course of a season, and of the equilibrium of a side. And in this regard, Liverpool have improved five-fold in five years: +11

in 2004/05, when finishing 5th with 58 points; +32 in 2005/06 when finishing 3rd with 82 points; +30 in 2006/07 when finishing 3rd with 68 points (14 fewer points, but only a -2 shift in goal difference); +39 in 2007/08, when finishing 4th with 76 points; and finally +50, when finishing 2nd with 86 points.

“I don’t think people realise how important it is to keep the balance,” Benítez told the club’s official website. “Because we are organised some people say we are not an attacking team. It’s so clear we are an attacking team and a very good attacking team. I think it’s always important to score goals, but to score 119 last year and now over 100 I think it’s very good. It’s not just the strikers as we have a lot of players who have scored for us. That is very good and it means the team has a very good offensive mentality and we still keep the balance and defend well. That is important for winning.”

Starting against Real Madrid on 10th March, Liverpool scored four or more goals in six of the next eight games. What made it all the more remarkable was that as well as the back-to-back Spanish champions, despatched with their biggest-ever Champions League defeat, four were put past Manchester United and Chelsea (both in away games), and in-form Arsenal, and five past the high-flying Aston Villa.

It was a quite incredible sequence of results against some of the top teams in Europe, three of whom made it at least to the 21

semi-finals of the Champions League, as well as an English club who’d spent much of the season in the top four before running out of steam. Blackburn had also been sent packing to the tune of 4-0, although no-one was pretending that they were anything like a decent side.

The Real Madrid result at Anfield set the tone. It was a defining match in the Benítez era, just a fortnight after the rumours of his departure had been spreading like wildfire. Big names had been

beaten in the past, but never so comprehensively. Before the ties, as is their foolish wont, the Real hierarchy and one or two of their players were talking about thrashing Liverpool. Instead, the Reds went to Madrid and outplayed the home side, snatching a late victory courtesy of Yossi Benayoun's headed goal. This set the scene for the return leg at Anfield, in Liverpool could have been forgiven for appearing cautious, with a lead to protect and a 0-0 draw good enough for progress.

Nothing could have been further from the truth; the Reds blitzed their illustrious guests with a quite breathtaking whirlwind of attacking football. Within the first five minutes, before the first goal arrived, the score could have been 4-0, so busy was Iker Casillas. The Spanish keeper made a number of stops, including one with his feet after Fernando Torres had sent Italian World Cupwinning captain Fabio Cannavaro the wrong way with a sumptuous

Cruyff turn; while the Liverpool striker tried to give Casillas 'the eyes' and beat him on his near post, Cannavaro found himself dazed and confused on Walton Breck Road, getting asked 'mind yer car?'. Casillas then tipped a dipping Javier Mascherano volley onto the crossbar, with Madrid yet to really get a touch. It was a blitzkrieg.

But the breakthrough soon came. A long clearance by Jamie Carragher was allowed to bounce, and Torres put pressure on big Portuguese defender Pepé, who crumbled like an origami tower hit by a tornado. In ran Dirk Kuyt, reading the situation to perfection, to square for Torres to blast into an empty net, just getting to the ball ahead of Steven Gerrard as Reds literally queued up.

It was Torres' first goal against bitter rivals from his Atletico Madrid days, a team he'd never helped beat. A penalty from Steven Gerrard followed, as Gabriel Heinze was harshly adjudged to have

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handled (the ball hit his shoulder, but he did flick his arm up, giving the illusion of handball). The Liverpool captain then killed the game, and the tie, two minutes into the second half, benefiting

from good work by Ryan Babel down the left to power home a tricky first-time half-volley with his instep. It was an incredible piece of skill to deal with a wickedly rising ball; not ‘fancy’ in the way that makes showboating compilations, but the kind of technique most players cannot hope to improvise.

In the coming months, records tumbled. First, Liverpool scored three or more goals in five consecutive games for the first time since 1979. A week later, it was six in a row: a first in the club’s history. By the time West Ham were beaten 3-0 at Upton Park on May 9th, the Reds had scored 36 goals in 11 games, only once registering less than three goals in that sequence.

When quizzed about the flurry of goals, Rafa Benítez felt that it was simply a case of more confidence, and greater understanding. “There is not really a change of emphasis,” he said. “The understanding between the players is better. This week we were talking in training sessions and we could see the team were playing with a lot of confidence. We didn’t need to say anything because they knew what to do. For me we have the same mentality, the difference now is we play better. We have more confidence and we can score more goals. If we can keep Torres fit it will be much better and you can see Benayoun is on fire.”

Late Drama

A key characteristic of the season was late drama. Even looking back to the halcyon days, it’s hard to recall more never-say-die attitude and crucial late goals, with no fewer than ten coming last season in injury time. The difference was that back then the Reds were the undisputed best team around, a luxury that isn’t open to Liverpool in the current climate. It’s also arguable that the teams from the 70s and 80s felt less of an urgency to score in the dying minutes, since more often than not they had games (and titles) wrapped up much earlier – although, of course, like all top teams, they kept going until the final whistle in search of victory when

necessary.

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Perhaps the season showed the strongest signs yet of the Reds turning into a version of the 'crushing machine' Benítez had at Valencia, only with more world-class match-winners. When quality alone wasn't breaking through defences, the Reds seemed to bludgeon the opposition into submission. Excellent fitness, aided by a great intensity to the play, saw opponents crumble at the end of games when they looked set to take either one or all three points. Liverpool led the way in the league with by far the most goals in the last 15 minutes of games, on top of all those scored in added time. It is often said that the best sides need to be able to win 3-2 as well as 1-0; that when the situation calls for it, be it through a sluggish start or a goal scored against the run of play, the side is able to win from a position of adversity. If the opposition score two, you need to be able to score three or more. This is true, although conceding lots of goals is a dangerous habit to develop.

Comparisons made between Benítez and his predecessor Gérard Houllier —both men being seen as cautious —fall down on this point. Houllier's teams, even at their best, rarely came back to win from a goal down. Plan A was great, but there was no Plan B (or at least none that worked). A league game was never won in Houllier's final five seasons after going a goal behind. Post-1999, the opposition scoring first effectively meant that the Reds were going to draw at best.

As time has passed, Benítez's Reds have reversed the course of a game more and more often. In 2008/09, an incredible amount of character was shown to rescue games, with 22 points won from losing positions, coming from six wins and four draws. The goals against column wasn't that different from previous years, with

Pepé Reina only one short of the clean-sheet record for the 4th consecutive year. So it hadn't become a case of shipping lots of goals to leave many mountains to climb, more a case of being

able to climb those mountains if the situation dictated. The Reds gained the most points in the Premiership from losing positions, with those 'rescued' 22.

The late drama all began with the very first home game. In a lacklustre display, the Reds were second-best to Middlesbrough for much of the match. Boro were a far cry from the sorry team they would become, as they began the season full of optimism and 24

vim, with Gareth Southgate an early winner of Manager of the Month. They sensed victory at Anfield, until Jamie Carragher strode forward in the 86th minute and unleashed a cross-shot that ricocheted in off Emanuel Pogatetz. With seconds remaining, as the game entered its fourth minute of injury time, Steven Gerrard swept a sublime shot into the top corner, and Mission Impossible #1 was complete. Little did anyone realise that there'd be more sequels than the Police Academy franchise.

While it didn't require a comeback to win the game, the late drama was again in evidence just four days later, as the Reds, having drawn 0-0 in both regulation-time games against Standard Liege, were just an extra-time minute away from penalties deciding their Champions League fate. As he would be so many times, Dirk Kuyt was the hero, popping up at the far post to smash home a winner with just seconds to spare after a great cross from Ryan Babel. Considering that the first league game, away at Sunderland, had been won 1-0 courtesy of an 83rd minute Fernando Torres piledriver, it was apparent that Liverpool were not playing well, but getting results.

Early season form can be notoriously misleading, with disparity in fitness levels across the 20 clubs (for example, those in the Intertoto Cup tend to be a lot sharper when the season starts), as well as different commitments for two of the Champions League participants, whereby qualifying games can disrupt the

start of the campaign. Liverpool had also been most affected by the summer's European Championships, in which Spain thrilled the watching world, while the Reds were also hardest hit by the Olympics, with Ryan Babel, Javier Mascherano and Lucas Leiva all heading for China for a few weeks as the league season kicked off. Team preparation was far from ideal, and it showed.

A 0-0 draw at Villa Park followed, a better result in hindsight than it seemed at the time, given that Gerrard was absent and Torres lasted only 25 minutes before the first of several hamstring problems. Next up were Manchester United at Anfield, in a game that would define the promise of Liverpool's season. All of the Olympians were now back in the fold (Mascherano having captained his nation to gold), and they would be needed—as would debutant Albert Riera, whose brief loan spell at Manchester

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City in 2006 started with a win against their fierce city rivals.

Despite going behind to a Carlos Tevez goal in the 3rd minute, the Reds didn't crumble, and got back into the game later in the first half with a Wes Brown own goal. The winner deservedly arrived in the 77th minute, as Mascherano dispossessed a dithering Ryan Giggs, before Kuyt nipped in at the byline. His low cross-cum-pass was inch-perfect for Babel, although the ball was skipping up off the turf from a slightly unclean connection. Babel kept his composure as the ball bobbed, making a firm downward contact that ricocheted the ball from the ground up into the air, and over the crowd of United defenders on the line.

While United were handicapped by the absence of Cristiano Ronaldo, Liverpool were twice cursed, with Torres still injured and Gerrard fit enough to take the field only in the dying minutes. The other event of note in the match was the inauguration of the Xabi Alonso Red Card Club; over the season's course, no fewer than six players would be dismissed for fouls on the Spaniard. First up was Nemanja Vidic, sent off in the 90th minute for crudely clattering

the midfielder in an aerial challenge.

Liverpool continued to make life hard for themselves four days later in the first Champions League group game, falling behind in Marseilles to a goal halfway through the first half. But within nine minutes the Reds were 2-1 up, thanks to two goals from Gerrard, the first of which was a stunning, looping shot played with a technique that looked physically impossible, sending the ball back into the far corner of the net in a way that would have left most players with a double hernia.

The first real setback of the season came in the next game, against Stoke at Anfield: the start of a number of home draws that many saw as the reason the Reds failed to land the league title. While later draws, particularly those against Fulham, West Ham and Manchester City, were simply what the team deserved on decidedly off days, the same wasn't true of the Stoke match. Liverpool had a perfectly legitimate Gerrard goal chalked off in the first minute, and from that point the visitors held on bravely. As seen against Derby County a year earlier, when an almost identical free-kick from Xabi Alonso sailed straight in, visiting teams can

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crumble once they have to abandon their negative game-plan and come out and attack. From then on the Stoke keeper produced some heroics to deny the Reds on a frustrating afternoon.

No dramatic comeback or late goals were necessary at Goodison Park, as the Reds bounced back with a win courtesy of two smartly-taken Fernando Torres goals, the opening strike being notable for the first significant contribution from Robbie Keane in a red shirt. Tim Cahill became the next player dismissed for a bad challenge on Alonso, but as with Vidic's red card, it came with the game as good as over.

After PSV Eindhoven were despatched 3-1 at Anfield —a game in which Steven Gerrard scored his 100th goal for the club —Liverpool travelled to new rich kids on the block, Manchester

City, whose British record signing Robinho was lighting up the Premiership (before going on the proverbial *Carnaval* for the winter and spring). Liverpool went in at half-time 2-0 down, to strikes by Ireland and Garrido. But two Torres goals had levelled the score by the 90th minute. The game appeared to be heading for stalemate when Kuyt popped up with a 93rd-minute winner. For the third time in almost as many games, Alonso was hacked down and the sinner, in this case Argentine Pablo Zabaleta, shown a red card. On this occasion it affected the result, with the Reds trailing 2-1 at the time, but there was no doubting the validity of the referee's decision.

A sense of *déjà vu* struck in the next game, at home to Wigan Athletic. A sense of *déjà vu* struck in the next game, at home to Wigan Athletic. Yet again the Reds were trailing 2-1, and yet again a red card was brandished in the direction of an opposition player after a foul on Alonso. This time it was Columbian winger Antonio Valencia, and yet again there could be no arguments over his second yellow card, even if the first, just four minutes earlier, was contested. Leading 2-1, Wigan had wasted over a minute of play by refusing to retreat the full ten yards for a Liverpool freekick in a dangerous position. They broke early every time the

referee blew his whistle, leaving the official with little option but to book one of Wigan's villains, so the complaints were a little hollow; and having just been booked, Valencia should not have

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made such a reckless challenge. Down to ten men, the visitor's plucky resistance crumbled, as Rafa Benítez introduced the pace of Nabil El Zhar to run at the tiring defenders. A goal for Albert Riera followed within five minutes of Valencia leaving the pitch, and a further five minutes later Dirk Kuyt struck his second of the game, as the game edged towards the full-time whistle. A sense of momentum was developing.

Next up in the league was a big test: high-flying Chelsea, who

were finally winning admirers for their football after a handful of years of attritional, hard-working play (which wasn't exactly ugly, but didn't match the beauty the club's owner desired). Phil Scolari, the Brazilian World Cup-winning manager, had changed Chelsea's tactics to produce a more open, pleasing style. The introduction of José Bosingwa on the right flank meant the Londoners were now attacking with verve down both sides of the pitch from the full-back positions. Chelsea would go on to set a British record for the most consecutive away wins, although their home form wasn't quite as strong in the early months of the season: draws with Spurs and Manchester United. However, a recent convincing 2-0 win over Aston Villa suggested that there were no problems.

Unbeaten at home for four years in the Premiership, and top of the league, their progress was undone by a Liverpool side shorn of Fernando Torres. While it took a deflected Alonso goal to win the game, the Reds were thoroughly worth the three points. Rafa Benítez had his side cut out the space for the overlapping full-backs in blue, and from that day on it seemed that Chelsea's new style had been sussed, even if they still managed to maintain some fairly impressive form until the new year. Strangely for such an esteemed manager, Scolari seemed to have no alternative plans when Bosingwa and Cole were denied space, although it has to be pointed out that he inherited a squad suited, and used, to playing a certain way. He wasn't given an awful lot of time to properly develop the team, and the money that his predecessors had lavished suddenly wasn't there. Dissent soon spread through the ranks, and the Brazilian wouldn't last until the spring, with Dutch manager Guus Hiddink taking the reins for the remainder of the campaign.

Liverpool beat Portsmouth 1-0, before suffering their first defeat

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of the season at White Hart Lane. Spurs were absolutely battered, but after Dirk Kuyt's early goal the Reds struck the woodwork no

fewer than four times, and were unable to inch the ball beyond post and crossbar. Spurs, languishing at the foot of the table, had recently replaced struggling Spaniard Juande Ramos with local wheeler-dealer, Harry Redknapp. By the time they played Liverpool they had beaten Bolton 2-0 at home, and, more crucially, rescued a remarkable 4-4 draw at Arsenal in the North London derby with two late, late goals. Even so, Spurs were besieged by a Liverpool side putting in their attacking performance of the season, only to discover that Redknapp, if nothing else, had brought a change of luck. An unfortunate Jamie Carragher own goal drew the home side level, and a 92nd-minute winner from Roman Pavlyuchenko secured Spurs the three points right at the death. For once, Liverpool were on the receiving end of a late blow.

Convincing wins against West Brom and Bolton were followed by another Anfield bore draw, this time Fulham leaving with a richly deserved point; the Cottagers would go on to become the season's greatest overachievers, but even hindsight offers little comfort to a disappointing night.

By the start of December, the Reds had a chance to go top of the league with victory over West Ham at Anfield; as it was, a draw was enough for that honour, if not enough to satisfy a disappointed crowd who voiced their frustration at the full-time whistle. The game was notable for old boy Craig Bellamy striking the woodwork, and, unfortunately, little of note at the other end. An away win at Blackburn was followed by another home draw, albeit one of the more exciting variety: another Carragher own goal (he now jointly holds the Premiership record for OGS) putting surprise package Hull City 2-0 up after just 22 minutes. The visitors would be 6th at Christmas, having won at Spurs and Arsenal, and narrowly lost a 4-3 thriller at Old Trafford, so it was not a total surprise to see them performing well, particularly with their best work done on the road —although the scoreline was incredible all the same. But

within ten minutes of going 2-0 up it was 2-2, thanks to Steven Gerrard. The Reds did everything to score a third goal in the most one-sided and outrageously open 15 minutes of the season 29

in the remainder of the first half, but it didn't arrive. Hull defended better in the second half, and Liverpool's momentum, and outright abandon, had been curtailed by the break. Given Hull's incredible start to the game the result felt a little like a victory, but the reality was two more dropped points.

Robbie Keane was the hero with his best Liverpool goal (admittedly out of only seven) away at Arsenal, as the Reds earned a fine draw; however, the result was tempered by the disappointment of knowing that a great first half was not built upon after the Gunners had Emmanuel Adebayor sent off —this time it was another Spaniard, Alvaro Arbeloa, on the receiving end. The home side improved when a man light, as they threw everything into the game.

Keane continued his good form at home to Bolton a few days later, scoring twice in a 3-0 win. But with the team facing four games in ten days, Keane was asked to sit out the next match, at St James' Park. And this is where his relationship with Rafa Benítez seemed to crumble. As with Peter Crouch four years earlier, the manager had stuck with his misfiring forward, only to rotate/rest him more when in form. This may seem counter-intuitive, but it could be seen as putting faith in a player at a time when he desperately needed it (at a new club, and failing to find the net), only to then leave him out on occasions when in form —and thus his confidence should be solid enough to withstand the rotation, in order to return a few days later and carry on his good form.

But Keane reacted badly to being dropped after three goals in two games. The media went to town on the decision, totally missing the point that Liverpool won 5-1, in a game that the Reds dominated to

such a degree that Shay Given, the Newcastle goalkeeper, who'd by then suffered eleven years of dodgy defending by various back fours, felt enough was enough; a score of 15-1 wouldn't have flattered the visitors, with Steven Gerrard, in the role Keane favoured, taking the Toon to task.

Keane returned to the starting line-up a few days later at Preston, but had an absolute nightmare, missing four excellent chances, often without even getting close. It seemed that he took being rested at Newcastle to heart and lost his focus; to make matters

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worse, the returning Torres rolled in a simple goal late in injury time after appearing as a late sub.

Next came Stoke away, a game preceded by 'Rafa's Rant'.

Had Gerrard's last-minute shot not cannoned back off the post, little might have been made of Benítez's public statement about Manchester United affecting the Reds' own form. Stoke proved over the course of the season that the Britannia was one of the hardest grounds to visit; fan-for-fan, the noisiest ground in the Premiership, and a place where United themselves had struggled (only winning courtesy of a late goal after Stoke were reduced to ten men) and where other big teams had failed to impose themselves. For Liverpool's visit, the pitch was frozen, too, making it an even more difficult task. The game finished 0-0, making Stoke the only team Liverpool failed to score against all season.

To make matters worse, resurgent Everton were next up, both in the league and the FA Cup, in two games less than a week apart. Both games, played at Anfield, were drawn 1-1, with the league encounter blighted by a galling 88th-minute equaliser from Tim Cahill. Gerrard, mercilessly taunted after his recent arrest, scored Liverpool's goals in both games, with the FA Cup going to a dreaded replay at Goodison Park. In that game, the home side again left it late, netting in the 119th minute with a deflected

shot by rookie Dan Gosling, who goosed the Reds as penalties loomed.

At this stage of the season, Liverpool were mostly on the receiving end of late heroics; at Wigan another game was drawn, this time after Lucas' clumsy challenge allowed Mido to equalise from the spot with just six minutes left on the clock. It was not a good time for the young Brazilian midfielder, who was also harshly dismissed at Goodison Park in the FA Cup.

That 120 minutes of cup football came just three days after Liverpool had beaten Chelsea at Anfield —an occasion on which an unjust dismissal had benefited the Reds. Yet again Xabi Alonso was on the receiving end, although Frank Lampard's challenge should not have resulted in a red card. With 89 minutes gone the score was still 0-0, but in pounced Torres, getting ahead of his marker to head home from a tight angle, and then, in the last 31

minute of injury time, he was on hand to stroke home another, benefiting from good work by Yossi Benayoun (whose substitute appearance, four days after his goal at Wigan, sparked the best form of his career). If Lampard was unlucky to be red-carded, José Boswinga somehow escaped after stabbing his studs into the back of the Israeli, right in front of the linesman.

By this stage, Manchester United had returned from the World Club Championships two games in arrears, but having cleverly used the excursion, as they had back in 2000, as a mid-season break with a bit of low-pressure football thrown in. (Winning the trophy still holds little meaning —it doesn't *feel* like the winners are World Champions, because it involves just a couple of games.) They suddenly clicked into gear, winning every single league game of 2009, and breaking a British clean-sheet record, until the visit of Liverpool in March.

The Reds had blown a great opportunity to open up a significant

gap, although it could be argued that it was simply their ‘blip’: the period all teams suffer when things don’t go their way. It also didn’t help that it was a new experience for the players —leading the league, and expected to win each and every match to maintain that position. As a result, they faltered, but the experience seemed to stand them in better stead later in the campaign, allowing them to top the table on occasions up to May 9th, albeit due to United having one or two games in hand.

The fixture at Fratton Park on 7th February was looking like make or break for Benítez’s side. And yet again it was a thriller. Liverpool played fairly well, but Everton fan David Nugent broke the deadlock on 62 minutes. Liverpool equalised with a powerful Fabio Aurélio free-kick inside the box, only for Herman Hreidarsson to head Pompey back in front with 12 minutes remaining. But the Liverpool late show struck again, as first Kuyt, on 85 minutes —firing in from a tight angle —and then Torres, on 92 minutes —with a powerful header —turned the game on its head.

Liverpool were not going to give up on the title without a fight, that much was clear. But with every hard-fought point came further disappointment.

First, Manchester City finally produced a decent away

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performance in gaining a draw at Anfield; this time Craig Bellamy, on his second return of the campaign, put the visitors ahead, only for the season’s ultimate late, late hero, Dirk Kuyt, to draw the Reds level on 78 minutes. The next league outing was the worst of the season: a 2-0 defeat at lowly Middlesbrough, who weathered a fine 30 minutes from Liverpool before benefiting from a Xabi Alonso own goal, and then deservedly scored again halfway through the second half as the Reds collapsed. The game was notable for a lack of fit right-backs, with Alvaro Arbeloa, Philipp Degen and Stephen Darby all injured; indeed, Degen’s various injuries meant that he didn’t start a single league game. Jamie Carragher

was rumoured to have declined to play in the position, just days after a very tough Champions League encounter, on account of his stamina not being what it used to. Instead, Martin Škrtel was deployed there, and the big Slovak, who'd had an excellent season, unravelled on the right.

Perhaps tiredness was a factor for others aside from Carragher. The game came just three days after a heroic performance in Madrid, which gave the Reds belief for the remainder of the campaign, but which also sapped energy in the process —at least for the immediate aftermath. Benítez had tried to freshen things up by making a few changes, in the process handing Nabil El Zhar his first league start, after a number of fairly impressive substitute appearances. But it didn't really work, and the manager faced criticism for omitting the hero of the Bernabéu, Yossi Benayoun. A couple of weeks later the Israeli was again the match-winner, this time in the 93rd minute at Craven Cottage —after the Reds, not for the first time in the season, rattled the woodwork four times in one game. Indeed, there were around 20 times over the course of the season that Liverpool were inches from adding to their goal tally, but ultimately these were shots off target. (The expression 'denied by the woodwork' suggests that the post and crossbar *moved* to repel the ball, and this is never the case.) However, the win in Madrid proved an overall turning point, with the Boro defeat the last setback before the Reds turned rampant, running in goal after goal, in victory after victory.

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Goals Galore

The best of the season was saved for Old Trafford on 14th March. Having never even earned a point there under Benítez (losing 3-0 the season before), and with United not having dropped a single home point since the opening day of the season, or conceded a league goal in 2009, the Reds were given little chance of succeeding.

Having fallen from the summit —although fresh from thrashing Real Madrid —Liverpool were goaded by the crowd of the new league leaders, and signs (albeit on little scraps of cardboard) were held up to mock Benítez, who was, apparently, “cracking up”. To make matters worse, in-form players Alonso and Benayoun were not fit for inclusion, and Arbeloa pulled up lame just minutes before the match. Bearing in mind what happened at the Riverside, Škrtel wasn’t going to be selected as his replacement again in a hurry, so Carragher moved across to right-back and Sami Hyypiä came into the side for what would prove his final start in a red shirt.

Uncertainty arising from the reshuffle might have been behind United taking the lead, as Park got in behind Carragher; Reina dashed out to intercept the pass, but instead he merely intercepted the Korean. Shy, retiring Cristiano Ronaldo took, and celebrated, the penalty in his customary low-key way. If Liverpool went into the game with a mountain to climb, it was now an entire range of peaks.

But then something unexpected happened, something that almost turned the season on its head. Nemanja Vidic, at the time the firm favourite for the Footballer of the Year, allowed a high clearance to bounce, and in that second of hesitation, Torres, reacting like a cheetah, hunted down the lumbering wildebeest; all that was missing was David Attenborough’s breathy narration. Left for dead, Vidic could only watch in horror as Torres sped through on goal and tucked the ball beautifully into the bottom corner.

Liverpool were level, and the Serbian defender’s nerves looked shot —he was later lucky to not concede a penalty for a blatant block on the Liverpool goalscorer.

The United defence simply couldn’t handle the Reds’ movement, and time and again Torres and Gerrard got in behind. On one such occasion —again from a long clearance —Torres slipped the ball

through the inside-right channel to his captain, and Gerrard made the usually quick Patrice Evra look like Jan Molby after a particularly heavy curry (with extra poppadums). A penalty was the only legitimate outcome, and thankfully Alan Wiley was man enough to risk the wrath of the home manager, who wasn't known for his tolerance of such decisions. Gerrard dusted himself down and sent the ball into the bottom right corner, just evading Van der Sar's dive. On a high, the Liverpool captain kissed the camera, which he may have come to regret: after all, the job was only half done. The second half would surely see a United onslaught, and victory was still 45 long minutes away.

At least that was the theory. In practice, United huffed and puffed but rarely troubled Reina. It was left to Fabio Aurélio to seal the points, after Gerrard once again powered past Vidic, who, not for the first time, resorting to a rugby tackle to stop him.

Again Alan Wiley showed bravery, and for the second consecutive game against Liverpool, Vidic was sent off. Up stepped Aurélio to lash home a curling free-kick which bamboozled Van der Sar simply watched sail by.

If that was the three points in the bag, then what followed was the icing on the cake. With Old Trafford emptier than the annual gathering of the Kelvin Mackenzie Appreciation Society, Pepé Reina launched a clearance down-field, and the world's most expensive defender watched it sail over his head. In darted substitute Andrea Dossena, to loft an exquisite lob over Van der Sar, who, for the second time within a few minutes, stood motionless as the ball looped into the net. "He's cracking up, he's cracking up, Rafa's cracking up" sang the travelling Kop. United were humiliated, suffering their worst home defeat since QPR won by the same score-line in 1992, in the days when Ferguson was still struggling for his first league title.

At the final whistle, Benítez was indeed cracking up: the smile

must have been difficult to hide, the laughter hard to hold at bay. United were still favourites for the title, but a marker had been laid down, for this season and beyond.

Next up were Aston Villa at Anfield. And on display once more was a tactic that opposition defences just couldn't cope with.

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Liverpool's pass and move had improved throughout the season, to the point where they were playing football as attractive as anyone in the land, but it was the long clearances of Pepé Reina (United away, Villa), Daniel Agger (Arsenal away), Martin Škrtel (United away) and Jamie Carragher (Real Madrid) that caught the better teams by surprise.

Liverpool fans don't want long-ball football, but can appreciate the tactic when it's done well—which, unless clearing the lines with no other options available, is sporadically, but with great vision and accuracy.

In Alonso and Agger, Liverpool have arguably the best longpassers from midfield and defence respectively, while Steven

Gerrard, now a quasi-striker, is as good as anyone up front, too, even though there's not the room ahead of him to hit those raking 50-yard balls he used to deliver from deep in his old role. The Reds complete a positional clean sweep, with Reina clearly the best footballing goalkeeper in the country. In other positions Liverpool have players whose passing is less exquisite—simple, but effective—but dotted throughout the spine of the team, these four can make a difference, with both the range of their delivery and their speed of thought.

Against Villa, it was the goalkeeper, in a rich vein of form with assists, who sent the ball arcing down the left wing, which Albert Riera, sprinting onto, hit sumptuously on the half-volley, sending it in off the crossbar. A similar tactic saw Riera win a penalty. Steven Gerrard stole the headlines with his first-ever league hat-trick, but getting teams turned quickly with back-to-front moves contributed

to the Reds notching thirteen goals in three games against previous European Cup winners in less than a fortnight.

The Home Straight

With four goals put past both Real Madrid and Manchester United, and five past Aston Villa, it was the turn of Chelsea and Arsenal to suffer the rapier Red attacks. Both London clubs managed to both score and concede four goals against Liverpool, in two actionpacked, belief-defying games within the space of eight days. It was

yet more drama and excitement in a quite brilliant period, in what

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was possibly the most sustained bout of thrilling, free-flowing football seen at the club since the wonderful 1987/88 team wowed the Kop. There had been bright moments in the interim 20 years, but nothing matching the intensity seen in the spring of 2009.

With tiresome predictability, Benítez's team had been paired with Chelsea in the Champions League; the fifth consecutive season the two had locked horns in the competition, previously either in the group stages or the semi-final, and now in the quarterfinal. Add the League Cup on two occasions (one final, one tie

at Stamford Bridge), an FA Cup semi-final and the Community

Shield, plus ten league games, and it was a case of two teams

knowing each other inside out. By this stage Guus Hiddink was in charge of the Blues, having already led his side to an impressive

3-1 win in the first leg at Anfield, when Liverpool missed the dogged work of Javier Mascherano, and failed to take advantage

of an early Fernando Torres goal. The first half was fairly even,

but once Liverpool conceded a second goal it was only the visitors who looked like scoring. With a new man in control, Chelsea were

suddenly less predictable than had Scolari still been at the helm,

and the element of surprise possibly helped the Londoners.

On 14th April the Reds travelled to Stamford Bridge, where

goals had been hard to come by: only one, at most, registered in

regulation time from any of the previous ten visits during Benítez's

reign (five league, four Europe and one League Cup), and not many before that, either. Liverpool needed to score at least three times, and more if the home side registered. To make the task tougher, Steven Gerrard was out with an abductor injury.

The blue touch paper was lit in the 20th minute, when Fabio Aurélio shaped to deliver a free-kick, some 40 yards out, to the far post, but switched the ball inwards, *à la* Gary McAllister at Goodison Park in 2001, to the near; Petr Cech was left scrambling in embarrassment as the ball sailed in, inches inside the post. A foul at a corner on 28 minutes gave the Reds the chance to go 2-0 up from the penalty spot, and Xabi Alonso, the man who'd been dragged to the ground, duly obliged.

Not even half an hour on the clock, and the Reds were one goal away from a semi-final clash with Barcelona. But despite

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further excellent chances and close misses, a third goal was not forthcoming in a first-half that saw Chelsea looking shellshocked and seasick.

The price for failing to find that crucial goal was paid early in the second half when the game was turned on its head, as first Didier Drogba (for much of the game at his most infuriating, collapsing like a new born foal on a polished floor covered with marbles and Swarfega), powered in at the near post to deflect a Nicolas Anelka cross past Pepé Reina. The Liverpool keeper looked seriously culpable until replays showed Drogba's slight touch, but despite the redirection of the ball, Reina should not have left such a gap at his near post. It was a rare and untimely mistake by an otherwise reliable player. That lifted the moribund Bridge, and within six minutes the game looked up for the visitors when Alex powered a fulminating drive from 30 yards that sped past the wall in the blink of an eye. Frank Lampard's goal on 76 minutes, as the Reds threw caution, and the kitchen sink, to the wind, was another cruel

blow, and apparently the end of the line for Liverpool. Fernando Torres, who'd not been at his sharpest, was taken off to prevent him further aggravating the injury problems that had dogged his season, and Chelsea looked certain for the next round, with the Reds needing three goals in the last ten minutes.

And yet, by the 84th minute, Liverpool were *leading the game*, with a goal from Lucas, whose drive was deflected past Cech, and Kuyt, who powered in a thumping close-range header to make the impossible seem distinctly possible. The criticisms of Benítez then started: Liverpool needed Torres on the pitch, a logic that ignored the fact that had he stayed on, the game would have taken a completely different path.

A minute to go, and it just needed one lucky break to see the Reds into the semi-final. Incredible. But in their all-or-nothing attempts to find that elusive fifth goal they naturally abandoned all shape. Chelsea broke and Lampard equalised. If it was to ultimately prove futile with regard to that season's competition, it was a performance of guts, character, quality and goals from which to take great heart.

However, just when the drama and tension surely couldn't be

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ramped up any higher, Arsenal came to town, to face a Liverpool side again shorn of Gerrard. It had proven a horrible first half of the season for the Gunners, but by this stage they were very much resurgent, with players back from injury and the scheming Andrei Arshavin brought in during the winter transfer window for £15m. The little Russian had the game of his life—in the penalty area, at least. Rarely can a player have done so little *apart from scoring four goals*; Arshavin was anonymous in a left-midfield role aside from when the ball fell to his feet those four times. Every shot he hit went in, and it was hard to argue with the quality of his finishing. While Liverpool contributed to their own downfall with three

uncharacteristic defensive lapses —by Mascherano, Arbeloa and Aurélio —fate determined that each was punished to the max by an Arsenal side totally outplayed on the night. There was a sense of bad luck on the Reds' part —wrong place, wrong time —in that Arshavin will probably never again score four goals in one game, let alone from just four shots. While two were smashed in from fairly close range, the two efforts from the edge of the box were inch-perfect into the corners. At the other end, Lukasz Fabianski, the young Pole who'd had a nightmare in the FA Cup semi-final days earlier, was also playing out of his skin. Whereas then he'd let tame Chelsea shots beat him, he was now keeping out everything thrown at him.

Part of football is not allowing the opposition to play to their best, and this is something achieved mostly with admirable success by Liverpool in 2008/09. But sometimes you cannot legislate for the *unfairness* of a player having a particularly inspired or out-of-character game against your team, especially when compared with how he 'shows up' against your rivals.

Arshavin's first goal, after 36 minutes, was so against the run of play it suggested to Kopites that it would be one of those nights. Torres then headed an equaliser from a Kuyt cross on 49 minutes, before, just seven minutes later, the Dutchman provided an even more inviting centre that Yossi Benayoun, having the best game of his Liverpool career, needed only make contact with to score; the featherweight Israeli threw himself bravely at the ball, and despite the close attentions of the goalkeeper and a defender, smuggled

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it over the line. Arshavin struck again, to once again deflate the home crowd, and three minutes later, completed his hat-trick, to a sense of widespread disbelief. Liverpool refused to capitulate, and within 120 seconds the Reds were level once more: Torres taking a fine cross-field pass from Albert Riera with his back to goal, maneuvering it with world-class control, before skipping past a

knotted Mikael Silvestre and smashing a low shot into the corner of the net. Cue delirium, with 18 minutes plus stoppage time still on the clock.

The game was now there for the winning, with three points vital in the race to overhaul United. But in the last minute, with almost every Red forward for a corner, Arshavin charged upfield as Theo Walcott broke, and lashed home a left-foot shot that left even him bemused. Liverpool players crumbled to the ground, reminiscent of scenes 20 years earlier when the Gunners staged a similar late smash-and-grab, but this time there was a vitally quick riposte from the Reds.

However, like then, it effectively ended Liverpool's title hopes. Yet again it was man-of-the-match Benayoun who reacted first in the box to smash a close range shot past a befuddled Arsenal rearguard. The Kop erupted, but not to the full; there was a sense of relief at not having lost the game, but disappointment —knowing it was the last kick of the game —at two points let slip from a great position eleven minutes into the second half. Then again, the Reds had trailed three times, so it was a good point to win from that perspective —just not enough to attain the bigger goal, and the fans knew it.

The remainder of the season involved waiting for Manchester United to slip up, something they never did after their capitulation at Fulham, seven days after their defeat to the Reds. Following the draw with Arsenal, Liverpool ran in three goals against Hull, Newcastle and West Ham, but by now United were securing their own dramatic comebacks: to beat Aston Villa 3-2 having been a goal behind; coming back from 2-0 down to beat Spurs 5-2; and virtually wrapping up the title with a 2-1 win at Wigan, having trailed 1-0 at half-time.

The Spurs result was particularly galling for Liverpool fans, given

that United were awful in the first half, going 2-0 down, and while greatly improved in the second half following the introduction of Carlos Tevez, they were struggling to get a proper foothold in the match before referee Howard Webb made one of the worst penalty awards ever witnessed: Heurelio Gomes clearly winning the ball from Michael Carrick, before the United player fell over the keeper. Spurs duly crumbled once the penalty hit the back of the net, and may have crumbled had United eventually scored from a goal of their own creation; but the later the breakthrough, the less time there would have been to equalise, and the less chance of winning the game. All teams get favourable decisions, but this was at a key moment in a crucial game, and totally baffling. From no angle did it look like a penalty, but that's what was given.

Liverpool finished the season with a 2-0 victory at West Brom, followed by another three goals, this time at home to Spurs as the curtain fell on the campaign.

And so, despite having scored more goals than Manchester United, lost fewer games and completed the league double over Alex Ferguson's outfit, Liverpool finished below their great rivals. That kind of combination of achievements, even in 'failure', can only be claimed by a very good side indeed. But you get nothing for being 99% as good as your rival.

Chapter Three

Disciples of Discipline

When a manager has less money to spend than his main rivals, and/or less time to build his dynasty and bring through the players his own youth system has helped develop, he needs a point of difference if he is to succeed. Copying the methods of a rival —especially doing so with lower resources —suggests he will remain chasing coattails; become a pale imitation, if you will. Something *unique* is required.

Arsène Wenger sticks to his unique principles, hoping that passing the ball better than anyone else will lead Arsenal to success. Or at least, passing the ball more quickly and more often. The distinction regarding the quality of passing is that Liverpool, not Arsenal, have the best collection of ‘searching’ passers in the country; the Gunners’ game is more about the fast turnover of possession, with the manager making timing averages of how often the ball is exchanged.

Wenger has also seemed intent on trying to bring through an entire team of youngsters, who, the theory goes, will mature together with incredible understanding and loyalty. Of course, it hasn’t really worked —as yet. But Barcelona’s recent success was

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built on very similar lines. Perhaps the difference is that players see Barcelona as the pinnacle, a place that they don’t want to leave; Arsenal, while certainly one of the game’s powerhouses, will always be somewhere players —particularly those from the continent —are willing to leave for the ultimate glamour clubs (just six months after arriving, Andrei Arshavin was quoted in the press as saying he wants to play for Barça, although anything written during the transfer window needs to be taken with a pinch

of salt). In 2008, the Gunners lost Alexander Hleb to the Catalans, and Mathieu Flamini to AC Milan. A year earlier, Thierry Henry had also moved to Barcelona, although arguably once he'd passed his peak (recent form notwithstanding, when he's been excellent, but not quite his old stellar self).

A team will also reflect the identity and idiosyncrasies of its manager. Players will inject their own personalities, but a manager will naturally gravitate towards those players who match his ethos when dipping into the transfer market.

Like its manager, Manchester United are talented but hotheaded; passionate, but liable to combust, as the hairdryer blows

a fuse. They play on the edge, often stepping over it, particularly in the era of Roy Keane and their snarling, pack intimidation

of the referee. Eric Cantona was another of this type: brilliant,

but totally bonkers. You could almost imagine Ferguson kung fukicking Mike Riley into row Z over the failure to award a penalty,

so the two had similar anger issues.

By contrast, the current Liverpool sides mirror the traits of Rafa Benítez: they are the epitome of control. Controlled aggression, control of the ball, control of the game, and control of emotions. A good example is Steven Gerrard, who now fits this profile, but was very different before 2004. He has developed under the Spaniard's tutelage, to the point where he is arguably the best player in the world.

As Liverpool swept aside Aston Villa on 22nd March by no less than five goals to nil, Sky Sports seemed intent on criticising Benítez for not looking happy. Comments were made several times during and after the match, to the point of becoming tiresome.

Did they want Rafa somersaulting onto the pitch, gyrating his

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hips and doing some kind of samba? *Perhaps* —although like some lovelorn teenager, they claimed that all they wanted was a little smile.

Liverpool, with a squad that cost up to £80m less than United's last season, have less flair overall (although the chasm of a few seasons earlier has narrowed considerably, even before United lost Cristiano Ronaldo and Carlos Tevez), but, in 2008/09, you could have made a good case for Dirk Kuyt, who embodies Benítez's ethos, actually being a better man to have in your side than the preening Portuguese.

A few years ago, that would have seemed laughable. Even beyond laughable. Even now, to most, that may probably seem the case.

When things are going his way, Ronaldo is unstoppable. (And in fairness, he did end the season in top form.) When they aren't, he's like a spoilt brat. He pouts, he postures, he gesticulates, he dives and he feigns injury. The previous two summers were spent looking longingly at Real Madrid, in the most overt case of flirting seen since Peter Andre and Jordan acted like bonobo monkeys in the jungle. Eventually he threw one too many toys out of the pram, and got his wish. But before leaving, he endangered United's season, and even when helping rescuing it in the final weeks, he endangered it once more with a bizarre tantrum at being taken off in order to be rested ahead of the imminent Champions League Final —suggesting that he was more interested in the personal glory of winning the Golden Boot, which ended up going to Nicolas Anelka as the league's top scorer.

Dimitar Berbatov is another case in point. A decent amount of goals and, joint-second in the Premiership (with Steven Gerrard, Cesc Fabregas and Frank Lampard) on ten, a very good number of official assists —as befits a target man in such an attack-minded side. And yet at times he showed all the enthusiasm of a snail after six sleeping pills. Continents shift with more visible enthusiasm. In terms of raw talent, the Bulgarian, like Ronaldo, is miles ahead of Dirk Kuyt. In terms of a desire to win, and support his team-mates, he's light years behind.

In the right team, Berbatov can thrive; while he didn't play

consistently well as an individual, United still won the league, and

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with three more points than the side from the season before, which was seen as their best-ever vintage. He scored 14 goals in 42 games, although only nine in the league. Dirk Kuyt scored 15, with 12 coming in the league. He played nine more games (51) than Berbatov, but around 75% of his appearances came on the right of midfield.

The point is not to denigrate Berbatov, who is still one of the game's X-Factor players (whether or not he does enough in terms of effort and attitude, he didn't cost £32m without reason), but to demonstrate to those who continue to deride Kuyt that his contribution can at least be the equal of a £32m striker. Indeed, Kuyt has the opposite of star quality; he does little to 'wow' anyone. But he does the unfashionable things brilliantly (you never see a YouTube video of running off the ball, or chasing back, or taking up clever positions, and rarely ones of goals scored simply by knowing to be in the right place at the right time and shunting the ball over the line with zero fuss or unnecessary embellishment). His contribution can be overlooked on the TV, but on first seeing him the flesh people always seem to remark at how he works *even harder* than they expected.

By winning the league with three more points than the previous season, Ferguson can claim Berbatov was worth the £32m, and that's hard to argue with. But Liverpool are now close on United's heels, and cannot boast such lavish signings. As such, a bit more guts and gusto is required at Anfield, to counter the more luxurious players Ferguson can afford. If United work hard —and they do —Liverpool have to work that little bit harder.

Liverpool's squad also cost far less than those of several other Premiership teams. So for the Reds, composure and discipline has to be a defining factor; a point of advantage over more expensive

sides. The same applies to cold, hard tactics, rather than emotion and elaboration.

In other words, the very things Benítez is criticised for —his emotional detachment, his head ruling his heart —are the very things that make Liverpool genuine title challengers on far fewer resources.

Cristiano Ronaldo's ability is widely admired, but his behaviour

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is hard for neutrals (let alone Liverpool fans) to sympathise with.

If Ronaldo was fouled too much, and not protected by referees, as claimed by both himself and Ferguson, then that needed to be addressed. Then again, Ronaldo's propensity to take elaborate dives and exaggerate contact cannot have helped him.

Talented players should be tackled, not hacked down —just as Fernando Torres deserves far more protection than he often receives. Of course, the Spaniard tends to try and get even with the football, rather than the studs of his boot. Look at how Torres was fouled three times in a couple of seconds at Old Trafford in 2008, only for a foul to be given against him; when both he and Mascherano politely asked the referee why, the former was booked and the latter sent off. The Argentine almost certainly got what he deserved, because of the length of his protest —he kept chipping away, and can have few complaints —but the responses obscured the original baffling decision to not award Liverpool a clear freekick. Then there is the persistent inconsistency shown by the FA, who appear scared to fully censure United, dating back to their aggressive haranguing of referees in the '90s. Mascherano received a two-match ban following his dismissal, despite no foul or abusive language, but within a year Wayne Rooney only received a one-game ban, for an even worse 'crime' of hurling the ball very aggressively in the direction of the referee, refusing to leave the field upon the showing of the second yellow card (as he ranted at the ref), and

punching the corner flag on his way off. Compare this with the behaviour of the Liverpool midfielder, and you can see that the England man, even though he also didn't swear, was far more out of control and aggressive than the Argentine.

It's not even as though Liverpool have a record of abusing referees or of ill-discipline; only Jamie Carragher tends to get verbal with them. So much for consistency, and so much for the 'respect' mandate. It only adds weight to Benítez's claims that Manchester United get away with more than other teams, on account of their manager's disdain for the FA and the power he holds within the English game. Yes, United do get censured, but they also get away with plenty, too. How Paul Scholes escaped a red card in the title⁴⁶ deciding match the previous season is still a mystery.

While Ronaldo and co. may have felt hard done by over certain rough-house tactics, the winger got away with no less than *five* kicks at opponents off the ball last season. Each should have been punished with a red card. None was. Some escapes led to United going on to win the match, often thanks to his subsequent input. Then there are the horrible tackles, like that on Danny Murphy at Craven Cottage, that stemmed from frustration at things not going his way. The Portuguese winger, who never really even won the hearts and minds of the United faithful, should have spent much more of the season serving suspensions. The abiding memory of the Champions League Final was of Iniesta, Xavi and Messi stealing the show, and Ronaldo losing his temper with all and sundry, and resorting to bad challenges.

Let's not for one moment pretend that Liverpool don't foul or make bad tackles —every team does, and almost every player makes at least a challenge or two that can best be described as 'illadvised' —but it's noticeable that since Benítez arrived, Steven Gerrard's red mists have become much, much rarer. Prior to 2004, Gerrard was culpable of some pretty unpleasant tackles, and of playing on instinct rather than thought.

Liverpool's disciplinary record is now excellent, and not by accident. Benítez's side look to harry and close down quickly, and get in the faces of the opposition, so they will concede free-kicks. But it has been more clumsy fouls, like those of Mascherano and Lucas, that have been the source of yellow cards, and the one red shown. Liverpool are clearly not a dirty side, nor one that harasses referees *en masse*. Again, this is a reflection of the manager. With Wayne Rooney, we've often heard the tired old line of "you can't take the devil out of him without compromising the talent"; in which case, why has Steven Gerrard improved by controlling his aggression and using his head more than his heart?

Daniel Taylor, who covers United for the *Guardian*, had a telling take on their defeat at Fulham. "What we saw on Saturday, when United finished the game with nine men, looked suspiciously like a side that was struggling to cope now the pressure is close to intolerable. OK, Paul Scholes's red card when he handled Bobby Zamora's goal-bound header, allowing Danny Murphy to put Fulham ahead from the penalty spot, was an instinctive reaction, something that can easily happen. But Wayne Rooney's sending-off came from a loss of self-control that, coupled with Cristiano Ronaldo's tiresome histrionics, epitomised United's lack of care and judgment.

"United's manager also complained about Rooney's second yellow card, when the forward picked up the ball and hurled it roughly in the direction, but actually a fair distance beyond, where United had a free-kick. "Did he throw the ball in anger? Yes, because he wanted the game to be hurried up," came Ferguson's defence. "Did he throw the ball at the ref? No, the ball went to where the freekick was taken."

"Notwithstanding the fact that this was not true (the ball went past everyone and was not even close to a United player), the most important question was this: was Rooney asking for trouble? Dowd had already flashed six yellow cards and one red as well as warning

Ronaldo he was one more misplaced word away from being sent off. Rooney's was a fit of pique, coming only two minutes after Zoltan Gera had hooked in the second goal, and he is fortunate that the FA is unlikely to take any action over the way he left the pitch, punching the corner flag as he went. Rooney is 23 now, not 18. He has been around long enough not to put himself in these situations."

Whereas Rooney is left unfettered, because of the belief that he needs to play on the edge to be successful, Gerrard has been shown how increased discipline can lead to better performances and fewer suspensions.

Again, this highlights the difference between Ferguson and Benítez. Each man has his faults as well as his strengths, but Benítez rarely gets the credit for the attitude he instils into his team.

Mr Duracell

For all his supposed shortcomings, and lingering critics, Dirk Kuyt is absolutely critical to the way Liverpool play. But better than Ronaldo during 2008/09? Quite possibly so.

Kuyt works hard, both in and out of possession; he is clever, with good game intelligence, if not overtly blessed with skill; he

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is versatile, meaning he can move about the pitch and perform to a high standard as the game ebbs and flows; and his control, while occasionally sloppy, is very underrated. Perhaps he has to concentrate on his control more than other players, but for the most part he deals with balls whipped to the wing with aplomb. (Where his control isn't quite good enough at times is when he has his back to goal as a centre-forward, when even the slightest lapse in control allows one of three opponents —either one of the centre backs or the holding midfielder —to steal it away.)

Crucially, given the role he now plays, he can deliver real quality into the box. He may not beat his man to get the delivery in, but

David Beckham was a master at just delivering the ball without bothering to attempt tricks; it's the ball needs to beat the man, after all. Kuyt's delivery isn't as good as Beckham's, but he has a centre-forward's knack of knowing where the man in the middle wants the ball.

Above all else, he never gives up. And that is vital; better players will throw in the towel and not deliver when the chips are down, but not the Dutchman. He is a man of substance, not a prima donna. It was no coincidence that he was involved in many of the late escapes seen throughout the campaign. Gary McAllister noted that "Dirk Kuyt is a player who is not as pure on the eye as some but he's had a fantastic season."

Kuyt's value was never more apparent than last season, when he finished as the league's 6th-top scorer, and it's 6th-top official assist-maker, with not one single winger ahead of him in this latter category. Given that he doesn't take corners or free-kicks, which helped other players rack up assists, or indeed take penalties, which boosted the tallies of the players ahead of him in the scoring chart, that's a great contribution, even before considering his work-rate and general team ethic.

While Ronaldo outscored Kuyt, he would not have done so without the aid of set pieces. Of course, he deserves great credit for the way he takes free-kicks, with incredible swerve; the Dutchman certainly couldn't match him in that respect. But freekicks and penalties can be taken by players who make no other effort in the match. And when it comes to penalties, Kuyt has a 100% record for the club, including some of the most high-pressure kicks imaginable (Champions League semi-final shootout, plus two vital ones away at Everton, including a last-minute spotkick to win the game). Kuyt has to defer to Gerrard and Alonso, but if he didn't—and it's not due to his own deficiencies—he could quite realistically have ended up with 23-25 goals this season, just shy of Ronaldo's tally. From open play, Kuyt scored more goals

than Ronaldo. He also directly created more for others. And he worked harder than the Portuguese, by some distance. Both scored important goals, but Kuyt really delivered at crucial times in crucial matches throughout the season, not just in the run-in. Vitally, Kuyt lifted those around him by the example he set.

In *FourFourTwo* magazine, in a section about Johan Cruyff's outmoded desire to see all teams play with two wingers, Dutch football writer Simon Kuper noted: "Nowadays, players run three times as many kilometres per game as in the 1970s [when Cruyff developed his ideas]. When players like Dirk Kuyt or Gianluca Zambrotta can play in two positions at once, it doesn't make sense to post a stationary winger waiting by the touchline for the ball all game."

The *Daily Mail's* Martin Samuel, one of the few enlightened journalists on the subject, wrote (in a piece that related to the way England now want to play) in March 2009 that "[Kuyt] ... is the changing face of modern football. The striker comes out of the space and the midfield and wide players flood into it. What Capello wants from his wide forward, Kuyt has been doing for years now, often to little credit. His work ethic, unselfishness and ability to operate in a netherworld between the touchline, forward line and midfield make him the epitome of the modern attacker. Kuyt will never have an FA Cup final named after him like Gerrard or draw comparisons with Pele as Rooney did in Portugal but at the top of his game for Liverpool, pound for pound, he continues to punch his weight against the best of them. He knows what his manager wants and he delivers it without ego or introspection."

It might not make him worth £80m, but to Liverpool at least, Dirk Kuyt remains priceless.

Chapter Four

The Gloves Are Off:

Ferguson vs Benítez

On January 9th 2009, with Liverpool leading the league —having mauled Newcastle at St James’ Park in their previous league outing —Rafael Benítez used his pre-match press conference for the trip to Stoke to list what he saw as facts relating to Manchester United’s treatment of officials. It came days after Alex Ferguson had written off Liverpool’s title credentials.

Many called it Benítez’s ‘Keegan’ moment: a quite ludicrous comparison referring to the former Newcastle manager (and Liverpool legend) turning into something of a jabbering nutcase in a Sky Sports post-match interview 13 years earlier. Whereas Keegan, shouting that he’d “love it, love it!” if his team pipped United to the title, was all passion and heart as he unravelled in the heat of the moment, Benítez was cool, calm and calculating as he delivered a premeditated statement. Keegan’s Newcastle, who had been leading United by some distance in the 1995/96 title race, fell away in ignominy, and thus was born the legend of Ferguson’s mind games. Never mind that they never really worked on Kenny Dalglish, either in his Liverpool or Blackburn

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days, or on Arsène Wenger, or even José Mourinho for that matter. Keegan aside, it’s hard to know who they actually have worked on —although referees are clearly put under extra pressure by the United manager’s many comments aimed their way. Teams slip up for a variety of reasons in a league run-in, and pressure plays a part; but it’s hard to recall too many occasions when words were key. Opposition managers are able to laugh off his supposed mind games —but referees, who rarely have the character of leaders, and

who are exposed on the pitch in front of 76,000 fans and numerous television cameras, are far more likely to wilt. That the United manager chose to suggest that the FA were against his team over the fixture list was just another example of putting the authorities under pressure, and attempting to undermine them. This, then, was the context for Benítez's list of what he believed to be facts. Here's the bones of what he had to say: "We started the Respect campaign, and that was when [Javier] Mascherano was sent off at Old Trafford. The referee [Steve Bennett] was the referee when they played against Wigan—he could not see the handball against Wigan by Rio Ferdinand, he did not give a penalty. They won the game and they won the title in this game.

"During the Respect campaign—and this is a fact—Mr Ferguson was charged by the FA for improper conduct after comments made about Martin Atkinson and Keith Hackett [who has now been replaced as the general manager of the Professional Game Match Officials Board by Riley, recently accused of being a United fan by David Moyes. Coincidence?]. He was not punished. He is the only manager in the league that cannot be punished for these things.

"Then he was talking about the fixtures. Two years ago we were playing a lot of early kick-offs away on Saturdays when United were playing on Sundays. And we didn't say anything. Now he is complaining about everything, that everybody is against United. But the second half of the season will see them playing at home against all the teams at the top of the table, it is a fantastic advantage.

"But at Christmas, United played on the 29th and the rest of the teams played on the 28th. We were away against Newcastle two days after playing Bolton. They were playing about 40 hours later,

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they were not complaining then.

"If he wants to talk about fixtures, and have a level playing field

as you say in England, there are two options. One is the same as in Spain, the draw for the first part of the league is known, everyone knows which weekend. In the second half everyone plays the opposite, so you all know. Sky and Setanta have the right to choose their games and it will be the same for everyone. So Mr Ferguson will not be complaining about fixtures and a campaign against United.

“Or there is another option. That Mr Ferguson organises the fixtures in his office and sends it to us and everyone will know and cannot complain. That is simple.

“We know what happens every time we go to Old Trafford and the United staff. They are always going man to man with the referees, especially at half-time when they walk close to the referees and they are talking and talking. All managers need to know is that only Mr Ferguson can talk about the fixtures, can talk about referees and nothing happens.

“We need to know that I am taking about facts, not my impression. There are things that everyone can see every single week.

“To hear someone talking when he has problems with referees every single week, and now complaining about the fixtures and complaining about everything, I think that is not fair. You can see every single week how they put [referees] under pressure, we know this. We have seen it before. We have seen players sent off at Old Trafford and we do not see our opponents sent off. It is part of the game. But to complain and to always have an advantage is not fair.

“We had a meeting in Manchester with managers and FA about the Respect campaign. And I was very clear, forget the campaign because Mr Ferguson was killing the referees, killing Mr Atkinson, killing Mr Hackett. But he is not punished. How can you talk about the Respect campaign and criticise the referee every single week?”

The word ‘killing’ is certainly not the wisest choice, but can be somewhat overlooked on account of Benítez speaking in his nonnative tongue. (‘Hammering’ might have been better, although

literally hammering someone is much the same as killing them....)

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The aftermath saw United continue on a run of 12 successive victories, and break the English league record for consecutive minutes without conceding a goal. At times their football was imperious, but for the most part they scraped 1-0 victories.

Liverpool went to Stoke and failed to take all three points. And so it was decided: Rafa's 'rant' was a big mistake. However, there was a long game taking place.

Double Reversal

By the end of March, the tables had turned not once but twice; Liverpool had thrown away their advantage, and travelled to Old Trafford on the 14th of the month facing the possibility of being nine points behind United should they lose, and with the home side still having a game in hand. Within nine days, the gap was down to just one point, although Ferguson's men still had an extra match to play.

All talk of 'Rafa's rant' had subsided, and this time it was Ferguson who was using a press conference to focus on Liverpool. The contrasting styles of the two managers could not have been clearer: the canny, irascible Scot and the young continental calculator. Ferguson's own supposed meltdown came after Rafa Benítez had put him under some pressure, not least with the incredible 4-1 win at Old Trafford. No-one could have forecast such a result. The reaction of the United players was crucial; Wayne Rooney, who had earlier that week said that he hated the Reds, was an unhinged dervish, screaming at his team-mates and waving his arms in frustration. Liverpool were not only awarded a penalty at Old Trafford, but United's Serbian centre-back Nemanja Vidic was also sent off. Neither decision was debatable, but crucially, neither decision was bottled by the official. Liverpool ran out convincing 4-1 winners, in perhaps the biggest shock result seen in a match

between the two in recent times.

With a straight face, Ferguson claimed United were the better side, something that even the most one-eyed United fan, excluding the clinically insane, could not agree with. If the score line slightly flattered Liverpool, it could have been even worse for the home side had Gerrard and El Zhar made more of gilt-edged openings.

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By contrast, Pepé Reina's goal was barely troubled.

It was Benítez's 100th league win, achieved in just 181 games, and only legendary duo Bob Paisley and Kenny Dalglish can boast a better record at Liverpool. Dalglish's 100th victory came in his 167th game, while Paisley's arrived in his 179th; Bill Shankly's 100 wins came in 184 games. By stark contrast, Ferguson took 231 matches to arrive at his ton.

Ferguson then followed this six days later with an equally bizarre and hugely inaccurate statement about Liverpool spending more money than United since Benítez arrived, thanks to figures apparently worked out, at his request, by United's Sports Technology department (but which just happened to match those of a seriously misleading United blog). As Benítez prepared to unhinge Aston Villa, United's staff, we were led to believe, were focussing on Liverpool's expenditure rather than their own imminent opponents. Either way, it was a sign of the state of mind of the United manager. It now seemed that it was actually Benítez who had got under Ferguson's skin, and not the other way around.

Thankfully for those who crave accuracy in their reporting, the figures quoted by Ferguson were widely dismissed across the media, although as Winston Churchill once noted, "A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on." Patrick Barclay of *The Times* (one of the papers to print the figures of the respective spending to disprove Ferguson), said

on Sky Sports, “You don’t need a Sports Technology department to know how wrong the United manager is, just the back of a cigarette pack.”

Rant

As for Rafa’s ‘rant’, it’s worth comparing a composed oratory read from a sheet of paper with one of the United manager’s more colourful exchanges with the media, back when Juan Sebastian Veron was failing to justify his £28m transfer to Old Trafford. With delicacy and wit, the United manager said: “I’m no’ fucking talking to you! He’s a fucking great player! Yous are fucking idiots!”

Then there are the numerous times he’s boycotted a media

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outlet because they have disagreed with him or been critical.

However stupid the media can seem, the agreement is to play ball; other managers ‘man up’ and face the mic, after all. Before and after the game against Liverpool at Old Trafford, Ferguson refused to speak to Sky due to the kick-off time of 12.45pm, despite the *police* advising a lunchtime start, and countless other games over the years starting at such a time. It’s all part of Ferguson exploiting his position as the ‘most powerful man in British sport’. In January 2009 *The Times* listed Ferguson at the top of their Power 100 list, saying: “He has been shaping our sporting lives for decades, to the extent that he is atop our summit, and the hard part is not establishing where his power starts but where it ends.”

There can be no doubt that Ferguson has in many ways earned that great power. It comes from a record of success, combined with the political clout and financial muscle of the club he has managed. A famously bad loser, he uses every weapon in his armoury to ensure victory. Indeed, what is called ‘mind games’ is often just insulting or disrespectful behaviour. It is his prerogative to try and get away with whatever he can get away with; push the envelope, wring every last drop of advantage out of any situation.

While he was largely more polite, it's unlikely that Bill Shankly —another sore Scottish loser who could swear blind in defence of his club —was cut from much different cloth. It is a manager's job to try and eke out any advantage he can, just as a forward has the right to go over a defender's outstretched leg if it's purposefully left to dangle in his path.

But, as with players diving without even the merest hint of foul play, it is up to the authorities to step in and act when Ferguson oversteps the mark, and to stamp down on him when tries to 'bully' their own governing bodies and match officials. This is where his continual moaning about the FA makes it harder for them to censure him; any attempts to do so play to his paranoia about the world being against him, and can be used as evidence of a conspiracy.

What Benítez wanted to know was how Ferguson and his thenassistant Carlos Quiroz could get away with questioning the integrity

of the referee after a home FA Cup defeat to Portsmouth, as well as attacking —not for the first or last time —Keith Hackett, the 56

referees' supervisor. When John Terry had a red card rescinded early in 2008/09, Ferguson said: "If it had been a Manchester United player Hackett would never have done this for us." That is a clear accusation of bias.

This followed his attack the previous season, following the Portsmouth defeat. "He's not doing his job properly," Ferguson frothed about the Hackett, before turning on Martin Atkinson, the official in charge of the game. "The referee's performance today was unacceptable, but he'll be doing it again next week."

Alan Swann, Chief sports reporter at the *Peterborough Evening Telegraph*, and, far more pertinently, himself a Sunday morning referee, wrote the following piece after that game:

"Is it any wonder us referees at junior level are abused from pillar to post when the management of Manchester United behave as they did at the weekend? To listen to Sir Alex Ferguson and Carlos

Quiroz as I did on the radio on Saturday evening I thought their match referee Martin Atkinson had ruled out three good goals, failed to give United several penalties and handed Portsmouth a soft one in return.

“Instead Atkinson denied United one spot-kick which was far from nailed on and ... well that was about it. Hardly worthy of the embarrassing rants I endured and if there is any justice the book will be thrown at two grown men who behaved like petulant children.”

It wasn't. No action was taken. It backed up Benítez's point—or rather, led to Benítez's point—that United's management, though punished on occasions, are too powerful to pull up for every offence.

If any neutrals think this is simply biased against United, then consider the view of Graham Poll as expressed in the August 2009 edition of *FourFourTwo*: “Alex Ferguson has an aura. The first time I reffed a game at Old Trafford, I did something heinous like add on nine minutes of injury time and I got the full hairdryer. He was letting me know that what I'd done was unacceptable.

“Manchester United has a special feel that can get to some referees, but I learnt to cope. I used to think that if I couldn't give anything but a nailed on penalty against United because Fergie

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would go mad, I'd bloody well make sure that was my policy for giving penalties to United too.

Later, when talking about José Mourinho, Poll says that “he could never intimidate me the way Ferguson did.” The word ‘intimidate’ is crucial.

Poll ends the piece by explaining that Rafa Benítez does not get involved. “He doesn't try to know the ref or even talk to him. But to be fair he's consistent. If there's a controversial decision against his team, he's as aloof as he is if they've won. I guess if you ask

referees how we'd like it, that's how it should be.”

Tensions between Benítez and Ferguson continued to grow in the aftermath of United's biggest home defeat for 17 years. An interview with *Spectator* magazine saw Ferguson list Martin O'Neill, David Moyes and Arsène Wenger as the three best managers in England. It seemed childish that he should omit the name of Rafa Benítez, a man who had won two *La Liga* titles in his only three seasons with a vaguely top (but not elite) Spanish club, and then the European Cup in his first attempt with Liverpool's mishmash of a squad; not to mention improving Liverpool's league standing, winning the FA Cup, and, as had just been announced, seeing his side ranked as the #1 in Europe based on results since 2004, the year he arrived at Anfield. Moyes and O'Neill had done well in lifting the average league position of their teams, but neither had won a thing at their respective clubs. Moyes went on Sky Sports after Everton had done extremely well to finish 4th in 2005, and sat sipping champagne. Maybe it went to his head, as a few months later they not only lost the Champions League qualifiers, they were immediately further embarrassed in the Uefa Cup. He had earned the right to that drink—just not on TV. Perhaps it's another sign of Benítez's humility, and reserve in the face of success, that the idea of him publicly quaffing bubbly after Liverpool winning a trophy is unthinkable; again, it's back to not celebrating, and keeping a clear head. For a time, it looked like Rafa's list of facts had backfired spectacularly; as previously mentioned, the Reds drew their next game 0-0 at Stoke on a frozen pitch, although Steven Gerrard was within an inch of winning it with the last kick, as his instinctive shot cannoned off the post. Only weeks earlier United had

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suffered a similarly tough game until a Stoke player was sent off late on, and the visitors snatched a 1-0 win. From the small margins between success and failure, molehills were turned into

mountains; Liverpool had flopped because of what the manager had said. That slip, and the exaggerated reaction to it, led to a dip in results, but it must be remembered that this period of the season also coincided with Gerrard's arrest for assault (the charges only being dropped months later) and further injuries to Fernando Torres. Benítez himself had been in and out of hospital with painful kidney stones. Liverpool were always going to feel some pressure, as newcomers to leading the Premiership at pretty much any time beyond the first weeks of the season.

With Chelsea due to play at Old Trafford days later, the Liverpool manager had wanted to make sure there was a strong refereeing performance; unfortunately for him, the Londoners barely bothered to turn up, making it irrelevant. With this in mind, it might have been wiser for the Liverpool manager to keep his thoughts private, although clearly as a tactician he had future occasions in mind. And months later, with United having several players rightly sent off in the run-in, as well as conceding penalties at Old Trafford, it could be argued that Benítez's words were working.

Allardyce and Ferguson: The Pincer Attack

On April 17th, just two days after the memorial service commemorating the 20th anniversary of Hillsborough, Blackburn manager Sam Allardyce launched a bizarre and scathing attack on Rafa Benítez, calling the Liverpool manager "disrespectful and humiliating" over an innocent hand gesture the Spaniard had made to his own players. Benítez had made the signal following the second Liverpool goal in a 4-0 victory over the Lancashire side at Anfield. He had been trying to get Xabi Alonso to work a freekick short and wide, to get Emiliano Insúa in down the left flank;

the Liverpool manager can be seen getting angry when Alonso ignores him by delivering directly into the box, and then smiles with embarrassment when the goal goes in, crossing his hands briefly to suggest, with humour, "don't listen to anything I say!"

Coincidentally —or, rather, not —Alex Ferguson used his own

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press conference to back up Allardyce's gripes about the Spaniard.

What made his actions all the stranger was that Allardyce *had yet to even make his claims*. The pair —who are very good friends and often speak on the phone —denied plotting the attack, but the premeditation was clear. *The Guardian's* website said the following:

“It's very honourable of Fergie to stick up loyally for his pal Sensitive Sam in this spat —although it does seem strange that he did it *before* Allardyce had actually said anything today. Almost as if they'd decided to launch a pincer movement on Benítez while chatting over the phone last night.”

Allardyce had not complained during the game, or after. He did not mention it in his post-match press conferences, or in the days following the match. No-one else picked up on the gestures, because there was nothing to pick up on. But six days later, Allardyce launched his attack in a press conference: “He [Benítez] opened his arms out and then crossed them over as if to say: ‘That's it!’ The gestures he made were dismissive to myself and to Blackburn Rovers. They were disrespectful and quite humiliating.”

Humiliating? Even if Benítez had done what he was accused of, it would hardly cause humiliation; only Rovers' performance in relation to Liverpool's could have done that.

It is utterly remarkable that a grown man can make such childish complaints based on such little evidence; quite how he can deduce so much from the hand movements of a manager whose gesticulations are much-ridiculed for being obtuse is hard to fathom. And why would Benítez signal that the game is over with 60 minutes to play, and just a two-goal lead? This is a man whose obsessive perfectionism is legendary, and who only a couple of weeks earlier had been livid that his team eased up on Aston Villa ... at 5-0 up! The language used by both Allardyce and Ferguson was

alarmingly similar, and equally vindictive. Both had inferred the same thing, supposedly without collusion, when no-one else in the world had thought anything of the incident, beyond the fact that Benítez smiled sheepishly after a goal was scored.

Ferguson, who claimed that he had not spoken to Allardyce and had instead simply seen it on *Match of the Day*, went even further. “There’s one thing with his [Benítez’s] arrogance that you can’t forgive and that is his contempt for Sam Allardyce last week. Did
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you see it? Absolute contempt! He went like that [crossing his arms back and forth] as if to say: ‘Game finished!’ I don’t think Sam Allardyce deserved that. A guy who has worked so hard for the League Managers Association, looking after young managers and players, he didn’t deserve that. To get that kind of contempt, I don’t think any other Liverpool manager in the past would ever have done that,” Ferguson said. “But he [Benítez] is beyond the pale.”

It also followed Allardyce’s harsh criticism of the Liverpool manager in the build-up to the game, when he claimed that the Spaniard “loves moaning and whinging”. Allardyce, who obviously has bizarre social expectations, was then offended that Benítez didn’t go out of his way for a civilised drink after the match; as if any normal human being would be desperate to share a small room with a man who had just publicly attacked him.

Allardyce, really starting to sound like a primary school child, then said: “I went to have a word with Benítez after the game but unfortunately and, as usual, he didn’t turn up. He probably was avoiding me and that shows you the measure of the man.”

Which begs the question: if he never turns up, why wait there?

And also, if he never turns up, how can it be inferred that he was specifically avoiding the Blackburn manager following the alleged gesture? Sammy Lee, who has served as assistant to both men,

came out publicly in defence of his current boss, out of a sense of fairness rather than duty. He thought Allardyce was talking nonsense, and therefore that Ferguson was too.

The Daily Mail's Martin Samuel was scathing in his criticism of the complainants: "The League Managers Association would gain considerably more credibility if they did not appear to exist as the fiefdom of Sir Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager, and friends. The sight of Ferguson and Sam Allardyce, of Blackburn Rovers, ganging up on Rafael Benítez, the Liverpool manager, last week was laughable, the idea that Benítez's gestures at Anfield during Liverpool's win over Blackburn were disrespectful even more so.

"Ferguson says previous Liverpool managers would not have acted like that and he is right. Previous Liverpool managers would never have been 2-0 up after 30 minutes against an awkward 61 side like Blackburn. This may be what Ferguson liked most about them."

The season ended with Benítez congratulating United, but not Ferguson, upon winning the league. The Spaniard was accused of being petty, although he clearly had his reasons. His assertions that Liverpool were the better team were hard to justify, but not without precedent from the United manager. In August 2004, just months after Arsenal won the league without losing a single game, the United manager said: "It wasn't championship form because 12 draws is just too many. In a normal year you are going to lose four games which, with the number of draws they had, would have cost them. The fact that they remained undefeated compensated for all those draws. It was quite incredible really but they didn't match our points total of 91 when we won the title in 1999-2000 and only drew seven games."

Tellingly, he said that "it's debatable whether they are the best

team in England.”

So maybe Benítez had a right to ask the same question of the champions five years later, after all.

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Chapter Five

The Juggernaut Effect:

Dalglish vs Ferguson /

Ferguson vs Benítez

Perhaps the perfect way to describe the challenge facing Rafa Benítez in recent times is by comparing it to the task Alex Ferguson faced between 1986 and 1991, when he tried to overtake Kenny Dalglish's Liverpool. Or, in other words, how do you stop a full-throttle juggernaut?

It's easy to say that times have changed, but the parallels are clear: Benítez is roughly the age Ferguson was then, having taken over a club that had fallen far behind its greatest rivals. Ferguson then, like Benítez now, inherited the massive burden of more than 15 years without a league title; in his case, it was 19 seasons since last United lifted the trophy. It's fair to say that in every way you look at it —league results, league positions, cup success —Benítez has done a far better job than Ferguson did in those early years.

This is not to say that Ferguson did a bad job, or was a poor manager; his record at Aberdeen, and his subsequent success, indisputably prove otherwise. Only Bob Paisley's record can stand up to Ferguson's in English football. But it shows how even

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the best managers can struggle to overcome the odds, if they are stacked too firmly against them. After all, if it was easy, and if he was a genius beyond all compare (whose touch made Midas's look like a copper-plated party trick), Ferguson would have breezed in and dethroned Liverpool within a year or two. United had a rich heritage, and their fans felt they should be winning the league. But it doesn't work like that, despite a relatively large spend by the

manager.

There are of course a number of differences, too. You cannot compare eras with perfect accuracy; tactics, fitness, style of play—all of these things change and develop over time. But there are a stunning amount of similarities in the situations each faced. It's about how a manager overcomes the problems that remain relevant whatever the era—such as psychology, pressure, expectation, relative wealth, and being kept from a title by a team who are a bit beyond the 'average' champions. If Benítez is finding it hard to usurp Ferguson, it is proving no more difficult than Ferguson found it to dislodge Dalglish, who was a younger man with far less experience as a manager.

Benítez and Ferguson were 44 when they arrived fresh from success in another league. Both inherited teams that had averaged 4th place across the previous four league seasons. Ferguson took charge a few months into the 1986/87 season with United, full of internationals, struggling for form. He encountered a drinking culture in need of eradicating, and that meant eventually selling some very good players, such as Paul McGrath, whose reputation improved at Aston Villa, and Norman Whiteside, whose didn't at Everton. Also sold was Gordon Strachan, who a few years later would prove influential in Leeds' 1992 league success. Perhaps lesser men would have persevered with players of such lofty reputation, but Ferguson knew that the collective was flawed; he kept Bryan Robson, another player known for his alcoholic excesses, because of his talismanic qualities, but others were sacrificed in order to break up the drinking brotherhood.

Benítez also inherited a squad with problems—albeit of a different kind—exacerbated by the decision of Michael Owen to try his hand in Madrid. It's still not entirely clear whether or not he was a Benítez-type player—subsequent campaigns have suggested

the Spaniard wants far more from his forwards than just goals —but there can be no doubting that he'd have liked to have sold the player (if that was his wish) on his own terms. To have little choice but to accept £8-10m for a player of international repute was not a good starting point for rebuilding the squad. To his credit, Gérard Houllier had eradicated the kind of unprofessional, drinkobsessed culture at the club that blighted Ferguson's early years at United, but equally he had bequeathed a squad low on quality beyond a few key stalwarts, and had contributed to the failure to tie Owen down to a longer deal. Beyond a few exceptions, the professionalism was there; the ability wasn't.

So despite the myriad changes to English football over the intervening two decades, the overall challenges were much the same. Perhaps most pertinently, Ferguson had to try and dethrone arch-rivals Liverpool, who had been dominating the league for 15 years: the reverse of the current scenario. There were other strong teams in those early years, most notably Everton and Arsenal, but Liverpool were the team who, to paraphrase Ferguson, needed "knocking off their fucking perch."

But did *he* actually do that?

While you cannot argue with Ferguson's record since 1992, which is nothing short of first-rate (domestically, at least), it's clear that Hillsborough played the biggest part in Liverpool's demise, not Ferguson. By the time United were champions, Kenny Dalglish, suffering from stress following the awful events of April 15th, 1989, had resigned, and as a result of the changeover process, by 1993 the Reds had fallen behind a number of teams, not just United; if anything, it was George Graham's Arsenal who exerted the most pressure.

Between 1989 and 1996, Liverpool also exacerbated their own problems with the appointment of two managers who fell below the required standard. Ferguson definitely benefited from a weak Liverpool in the early to mid-'90s —but he was hardly going to

complain about that fortune; nor can it be held against him that the team who should have been an important threat were little more than an impotent one. When Liverpool had Dalglish at the helm, before the pressure of an off-the-pitch disaster took its toll, Ferguson couldn't even get close to the Reds. As stated earlier,

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that didn't make the United boss any less of a manager, but it does show how a situation often dictates the level of success possible.

Why did it take Ferguson so long to achieve success? After all, he did lead United to runners-up in his second full season, albeit a long way behind the most exciting Liverpool side ever seen, who had dominated the league from start to finish; the final nine point gap was deceptive, with the title wrapped up in April, and Liverpool only winning one of their final five games thereafter.

It was only then that Ferguson got to serious work in the transfer market, and it took time for those early signings to make an impact. Paul Ince, Steve Bruce, Gary Pallister and Brian McClair were all key men for United when ending their 26-year wait for the title, but they were bought in 1987 and 1988, meaning it took four or five years for them to really excel. Indeed, Pallister was seen as a serious flop initially, with stories abounding of him being homesick and sitting alone in pubs solemnly supping pints.

While there's less patience now, there is no evidence that it is easier to win the league *quickly*. Arsène Wenger did so (eleven years ago), but he was the first man to introduce modern continental techniques to English football; techniques that are no longer a great advantage, but which at the time were incredibly powerful. And José Mourinho did so at Chelsea, but with unprecedented riches, allied to a team that was already on the up before he arrived. Money gave him the luxury to buy without waiting, or without trading; anyone he didn't like he could loan out or write off without needing to recoup and reinvest —the normal process, which in itself can

take a long time, often meaning targets move elsewhere, and the transfer window closes.

The one advantage Benítez has over '80s Ferguson is that the Champions League has made it easier for Liverpool to cement their position in the top four. Of course, Liverpool have only been Champions League regulars *since* the Spaniard arrived; when he took over, the Reds, who'd just scraped 4th, weren't that far ahead of teams like Newcastle in terms of the ability to secure that last spot, and had qualified only twice in the previous 12 years.

But even this bonus has a flip side. Liverpool need to do well in Europe to raise money (given that Anfield holds 30,000 fewer fans than Old Trafford) and also to attract better players —which, so far, 66

has been the case. (Would Torres have joined a UEFA Cup side? No. He wanted, and deserved, Champions League football.) But it also means more games, which means more effort, more injuries and less preparation time for league matches. It's *Catch-22*. The money raised through Europe, necessary in order to strengthen the squad, comes at the cost of that squad's durability across a league campaign. That's why progress is slow, often involving one backwards step in order to take two forward.

The same kind of progression can be seen with Everton in recent seasons. At first, participation in the UEFA Cup seriously inhibited their league performances. But it also served as both a learning experience, and a means to attract better players to Goodison Park. As a result, they've got further than before in Europe (without ever threatening to win something) and have built up a certain strength in the Premiership.

Part of Liverpool's problem has been coming back from a midweek game on the continent to face inferior but fresher opposition who have had a full week to plan their negating tactics, or whose extra energy can win the day. With a squad that cost far

less than Chelsea's and United's, more strain is put on the resources at Liverpool. If the manager doesn't rotate, he risks injuries and some battle-weariness; if he does rotate, and his squad isn't 100% perfect, he risks fielding weaker players whose extra freshness is unable to compensate for their lesser abilities.

Bankrolled

There can be little doubt that Alex Ferguson took United to their first modern title on the back of some serious bankrolling. He spent more money between 1986 and February 1991 (£12.8m gross, £9.87m net, from the point he took charge to the point Dalglish resigned) than his rival managed in his entire tenure, which came to an end after almost six seasons (£12.5m gross, but only £5.77m net). Clearly Ferguson got nowhere near to toppling the Reds in that time, despite his net spend being almost twice as great.

Was Ferguson a bad manager, or one who failed to understand English football?

No.

Was he therefore destined to never win the league?

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No.

But it's harder to usurp an established power.

So why did Ferguson spend so much more net than Dalglish?

Both men handed over roughly £12.5m on players, but Liverpool recouped a far greater amount.

It's actually pretty much the exact same situation that Benítez has faced since 2004; Ferguson, like Dalglish in the '80s, had a lot of his squad already in place. Bruce Grobbelaar, Alan Hansen, Steve McMahon, Ronnie Whelan and Steve Nicol all spanned the entire period when Dalglish and Ferguson managed the two English superpowers, and Ian Rush was absent for just one season.

Those men formed the heart of Dalglish's Liverpool. They were five players who *didn't need to be signed* between 1986 and 1991; the

kind of quality that could cost a king's ransom, but who, once on the books, obviate the need to find anyone else in their positions. Also, Rush had such a strong Liverpool connection that meant that although he needed to be re-signed, it was a relatively easy deal because of his time at Anfield.

Of course, Rush's initial departure led to the greatest influx of talent under Dalglish: John Aldridge, Peter Beardsley, John Barnes and Ray Houghton all signed in 1987. So Dalglish was partly 'blessed' in that Rush, whom he inherited, at least raised enough money to rebuild the attack upon his transfer, before returning and slipping back into his old groove by 1989/90.

Ferguson has enjoyed similar bonuses more recently: selling his best players for big fees as they approached their 30s (such as Jaap Stam, David Beckham and Ruud van Nistelrooy). More time in the job, particularly at a successful side, brings about a long-term momentum, whereby players who win titles can be cashed in on at the right time; Arsène Wenger is another master at this.

Benítez never had such a luxury. Michael Owen's value wasn't great due to his contract situation. The only seriously saleable asset was Steven Gerrard, but a move to Chelsea thankfully never came to pass. Benítez had to build a side with little money to spend in relation to his closest rivals, but also little scope to raise his own money by offloading players. Most of those he sold were the duds, who raised precious little cash.

Similarly, when Ferguson looked to rebuild in the '80s, he couldn't

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raise lots of money from the mixed bag of players he inherited.

So his net spend was adversely affected by his inability to offload squad members for fees that made it easy to trade up. That's why inheriting a failing side is so difficult. Buying clubs know that you are desperate to offload the dead wood, and it can take a number of years to weed them out.

The biggest profits Rafa has made have been on players he himself bought: Crouch, Bellamy, Sissoko, and the club's record sale is the £12-19m recoupable on Robbie Keane. Of course, Benítez hasn't been in the job long enough to sell his real gems, in the way Ferguson and Wenger (with Thierry Henry and Patrick Vieira) have picked the perfect time to cash in on players aged 29/30/31. If Benítez wanted to sell Fernando Torres he could make a massive profit, but the young striker still has five years before he even reaches 30. So it's not relevant.

One problem that has come with the upturn in form is that wealthy clubs like Real Madrid, Barcelona and Manchester City are circling, looking to pick off players like Xabi Alonso and Javier Mascherano, although they haven't wasted their time enquiring about Steven Gerrard or Fernando Torres. But Liverpool need to keep the core of this squad together for a few years yet; perhaps one big player might leave, but a return to the drawing board adds years to reaching the desired targets. *Successful* teams are rebuilt because the manager has earned some respite, even if patience doesn't stretch that far (there were no rumblings about Arsène Wenger after three years without the title, but by last season, when it became five, the Gunners' fans weren't quite as 'faithful').

By year six, Alex Ferguson's side began to come into its own.

With a couple of cup successes under its belt (1990, 1991), it made its first genuine title challenge in 1991/92. It ultimately faltered right at the death, at Anfield of all places, and Leeds took the final trophy before the league was rebranded. But United were set ripe for the new era. Leeds imploded after their unexpected success.

Arsenal had lost their league form under George Graham, who was soon to depart over the 'bung' scandal. Liverpool were a total mess under Souness. The path was relatively clear, although United were by some distance the best side in the country over the next couple of years, winning the title by ten points each time with an exciting,

well-balanced side, albeit with Aston Villa and Norwich the nextbest teams when they finally clinched that longed-for title in 1993.

What Benítez would give for two such weak contenders now.

All in all, you cannot ignore the way Ferguson ended his club's 26-year nightmare. There is a lesson there. Arsenal had dropped to tenth in the league, Liverpool, having looked like entering a relegation battle, scraped up to sixth with just three more points than the Gunners, and although the league was generally more of a meritocracy, there simply weren't any challengers worthy of the name. It was the same the last time Liverpool won the league, in 1990: a far-from vintage Aston Villa team had run them close, with nothing like the noteworthiness of the side that succeeded the Reds in winning the League in 1981 and then repeated the feat with the European Cup a year later. At least by 1993/94 a genuine title threat had emerged, in Blackburn, whilst Newcastle, recently promoted under Kevin Keegan, were bona fide contenders in the making, if ultimately flawed. The Premiership was starting to make teams wealthy enough to challenge United, but the money only filtered through only once the title had finally gone to Old Trafford.

It's clear to see that Benítez has done many things along the same lines as Ferguson did, but doing things right hasn't been enough. The path just hasn't cleared. Even perfection might not have been enough, and that might not change.

After all, United themselves are back-to-back(-to-back) Premiership Champions and back-to-back Champions League finalists. Admittedly Arsenal, while still managing to make the Champions League semi-final, are in transition (for about the fifth season running). Chelsea, however, were supposedly crumbling and in crisis throughout much of 2008/09, and yet were literally seconds away from their second consecutive Champions League Final, and as with Liverpool, had a league record that would have won the title in many previous years. The Londoners finished 3rd

on 83 points, a figure matched in that position in the Premiership only by Arsenal a year earlier, while Liverpool's 82 points in 2006 was the only other comparable total for a team finishing outside the top two; otherwise, the 14-year high for 3rd (starting when the league changed to 38 games) was 77 points, and in many seasons the 3rd-placed team racked up only 60-69-point tallies.

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Liverpool have clearly benefited from getting into those Champions League positions and staying there. The top four is now virtually a closed shop. But over the same period of time, the other members of the 'big four' have strengthened in notable ways. Chelsea went into overdrive in 2004, at the very moment Benítez pitched up. Arsenal built a new stadium that absolutely dwarfs the revenue generated by Anfield, and although the credit crunch has affected their plans, particularly in trying to sell luxury flats at Highbury, at least they were able to construct it at the right time, before steel costs rocketed and borrowing the money in the first place became virtually impossible. And Manchester United began to enjoy the most successful period in their history. It could be argued that, with improvements each and every year, Benítez has now 'seen off' first Arsenal and now Chelsea—the two strongest sides at the point when he arrived in English football, both seemingly light years ahead of Liverpool. Of course, no-one can trust that anything or anyone has been seen off, such is the strength and resourcefulness of the top four. The problem was that United, while weaker between 2003 and 2006, were struggling because Ferguson was rebuilding, and not, as one *Guardian* writer observed in a blog, because he'd lost the plot. Under the heading *Shredding His Legacy At Every Turn*, United fan Rob Smyth ranted: "Almost everything about the club reeks of disarray ... The problems are so obvious, so fundamental, as to beggar belief that they have not been addressed. Just as the glory years of 1992 to 2001 will only fully be appreciated in 20 years'

time, so will Ferguson's subsequent failure ... United fans think this season is going to be bad. It hasn't even started."

Nine months later, they were crowned champions.

Return of the King

It seems that the rivalry between Dalglish and Ferguson is not over. In terms of management the two have surely locked horns for the last time, but Dalglish's return to Liverpool will certainly add a little spice to the race for a 19th league title. His role is two-pronged: first, to act as an 'overlord' at the Academy, to help recruit young talent and oversee the way the institution is run; and second, to act as a general figurehead, in the way Bobby Charlton

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acts as an ambassador for Manchester United across the globe.

Academy Director Frank McParland now reports directly to Benítez, and Dalglish will play a key role alongside McParland in driving forward the development of the Academy, and will be based at the Kirkby site.

"I am really pleased to have Kenny as a part of the staff," said Benítez, unveiling Dalglish some 32 years after Bob Paisley had first done so. "We were looking for someone who has a knowledge and a passion for the club and Kenny is the perfect choice.

"He will help at the Academy with the development of players and will also have an ambassadorial role at the club. If you're looking for somebody to go around the world on behalf of Liverpool Football Club then I don't know anybody better than Kenny.

"When you talk to him about players and football systems it's clear he has a lot of experience. That's good for the club and also for the young players coming through. We are changing things at the Academy, we are bringing in new ideas and new people but we're keeping the spirit and the heart of the club. Kenny has played for the club, he's managed the club, he's done everything. He's a fantastic signing."

Dalglish said: “I spoke to Rafa a few months ago and things have progressed from there. Now that it has come to fruition I am very excited, but also a bit nervous. For the boss to put his trust in me is a great compliment and I am coming back as a very lucky person. When you leave a club you don’t often have a chance to return, so I am fortunate for being given such a fantastic opportunity.

“Rafa has made a very brave decision to revamp the Academy.

There are lots of positive things happening here and there is a real feel-good factor around the place. It’s fantastic for me to be a part of that.

“People who come to the Academy should be delighted that Rafa is taking such an interest in the development of the young players. Everyone knows the most important team at the club is the first team and hopefully we can start producing players to challenge for a place in Rafa’s plans. It won’t happen overnight but I’m looking forward to working with Frank McParland and the rest of the Academy staff to do the best job I can.”

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Dalglish will also work with the Liverpool commercial team as club ambassador, and added: “There’s a lot of work to be done and I will do whatever is asked of me. I’m just so pleased to be back. My own role will be much more focused on administration and recruitment, working closely with Frank McParland. I won’t be on the pitches taking sessions too often but I’ll be there watching and offering advice. We’ll leave the training to the new coaches that Rafa has recruited because that’s their area of expertise. From listening to Rafa and on the first introductions I’ve had with the Spanish guys we’ve got the best in the business.

“It’s a fresh start from the bottom to the top at Kirkby and there’s one man to thank for it —Rafael Benítez. He’s been a fantastic supporter of the Academy. The easiest thing in the world for him to do would have been to say to himself that the health and

well-being of the club's youth system wasn't his responsibility. "He could have simply been content with concentrating all his energies and all his attention on the first team, but that's not the type of man he is. He wants this football club to be healthy from top to bottom. That's why he has pushed for these changes and made them happen."

If anyone symbolises the ability to generally get the better of Alex Ferguson then Dalglish is that man. Others, like Arsène Wenger and José Mourinho, have had the upper hand for a time, but Ferguson always got the better of them eventually. Dalglish left both Liverpool and Blackburn with his teams having won the league the previous season, and only his ill-fated, brief spell at Newcastle sullies his record against the United manager.

His larger-than-life presence may have undermined previous managers, but Rafa Benítez has the strength of character and assuredness in his position to have someone like the legendary no.7 onboard without it causing an imbalance of power.

It is the kind of appointment to make when on the rise, not in panic when in disarray. Crucially, this is an appointment for the future, not merely a romantic nod to the past.

Part 2

money talks:

**How much Does it cost
to Win the League?**

Chapter Six

The True Cost

It's fair to say that a chasm exists between what most people feel clubs have spent and what is actually the case. This past twelve months has seen all sorts of myths arise about how much Rafael Benítez has shelled out as Liverpool manager, to the point where Alex Ferguson was quoting blatantly false figures in a press conference, just days after the Reds won 4-1 at Old Trafford.

My first serious interest in the relative spending of the managers
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arose towards the end of 2007, when a Manchester United blogger published figures that even at first glance were clearly misleading. But being the internet, it spread like wildfire. Of course, it's virtually impossible to get a 100% accurate picture of transfer activity, given that some fees are not declared, and others rely on cumulative payments upon certain targets being met —and these targets can range from, it seems, the winning of international caps through to the number of different hairstyles adopted. But the majority of deals are still fairly transparent.

Therefore, I believe the figures used in this book to be more than 95% correct; most will be 100%, as when quoted by both the buying and selling clubs, and I'd suggest a 10% tolerance where fees are estimated (given that even estimates will be based on other people's educated guesses and 'insider info'.)

All fees have been researched from reliable sources, but the cloud of confusion and obfuscation that some clubs like to create around their dealings, either when trying to make themselves look richer than they actually are, or when falsely playing the pauper, cannot be totally eradicated. Even given the tolerance of a few percent in terms of accuracy, the analysis used in this book

gives a very good *indication* of the financial power of clubs during the Premiership era.

Relative Transfer System

Obviously, standard inflation does not apply to football. Spending tends to increase upon the striking of financial deals with broadcasters, or with the arrival of a new wealthy benefactor flashing the cash like a coked-up rapper in a jeweller's. The price of a top player rises for myriad reasons, many of which seem fairly arbitrary. As each and every footballer is a unique commodity, there is no hard and fast pricing structure, and ultimately a lot depends on what the buying club is willing to pay, and what the selling club is prepared to accept.

As I discovered when writing *Dynasty*, there appears to be no perfect way to compare eras, so the next-best thing is to turn to turn fees into percentages of the transfer record. For example, at the start of 1979, the British transfer record was £516,000. By 75

the end of the year, after a number of deals, it was three times that amount. Clearly this rapid escalation had no relevance to general societal inflation. Instead, it was because Club A had to break the record to secure its target, meaning Clubs B-Z raised the price of its players in relation to the new benchmark. Soon even Andy Gray cost a million pounds.

So the Relative Transfer System, devised for that book, set any transfer record at 100%, with all deals ranked against that figure, until the next high-water mark was created. For example, Alan Shearer cost Newcastle £15m in 1996. Therefore, that was the 100% figure until 2000, when Rio Ferdinand moved to Leeds for £18m. From that point until the next time the record was broken, any £15m transfer would be ranked at only 83%, with £18m the new 100% benchmark. A £9m transfer in 2000 would equate to 50%, £1.8m would be 10%, and so on. The current English record at the

time of writing is £32.5m, so that would score 100%, just as Trevor Francis, the first million pound player in 1979, was 100%.

The only potential transfer that could have thrown this system out of kilter was Manchester City's £100m bid for Kaka in January 2009. This would have set a transfer ceiling that was perhaps not realistic to judge others against; no other club could have afforded to pay attention to it as a new high-water mark. It would have borne no relation to the economy of the game itself. Transfers of other players would still have risen as a result, but at the time it seemed unlikely that anyone would pay over £50m for any of the remainder of the world's best players. Trebling the British record in one deal would have been unthinkable; then again, when the transfer record was doubled in one fell swoop in 1979, it may have felt just as unbelievable, especially when by the end of the year, the original figure had actually trebled.

Kaka, of course, was not in the mood to move to a mid-table English club, despite its riches. In the end he moved to Real Madrid for just over half City's bid, at a reported £56m. This smashed the previous world record fee of £45.6m that Real had paid for Zinedine Zidane in 2001, and was almost double the still-existing English top fee. Within a week, Cristiano Ronaldo was

heading to the *Madridistas* to join him, for a staggering £80m, paid

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in one lump sum. The Spanish giants, humiliated by Liverpool last season and envious of Barcelona's historic and über-stylish success, went into overdrive, spending more than the entire cost of the current Liverpool squad on just two players, and their largesse didn't stop there. Raúl Albiol moved from Valencia for £13m, and Karim Benzema was soon snapped up from Lyon for £35m, with the Spanish giants also linked with other players, including Alvaro Arbeloa and Xabi Alonso at Liverpool. The era of the *galactico* has returned to the Bernabéu, and the repercussions are being felt across Europe, as a tidal wave of inflation disperses across the

continent's footballers.

When I created the Relative Transfer System for *Dynasty*, it was designed to compare the spending of eight Liverpool managers over a 50 year period, as well as the outlay of their main rivals. It was vital to find a way of equating transfers of the '60s or '70s with those of the modern day; after all, £40,000 was a fortune in 1959, but an almost negligible amount five decades later—a quarter of one week's wages for the elite players. The system itself is naturally without bias, although the transfer fees from which the calculations are made will always be debated. Even allowing for my Liverpool leanings, I have tried to be as fair as possible. As such, all of the squads that were assessed will be made available in due course, to show how the calculations were made.

From the transfer percentages of each individual player, both Strongest XI and Squad Averages can be ascertained. As an example for those unfamiliar with the system, the Liverpool team of Graeme Souness' final season was as follows:

Bruce Grobbelaar

17%

(1981)

Mark Wright

76%

(1991)

Rob Jones

10%

(1991)

Neil Ruddock

76%

(1993)

Julian Dicks

67%

(1993)

John Barnes

60%

(1987)

Nigel Clough

61%

(1993)

Steve McManaman

0%

YTS

Jamie Redknapp

12%

(1991)

Robbie Fowler

0%

YTS

Ian Rush

100%

(1988)

Total Average

43.5%

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This was the side that drew 3-3 with Manchester United in a classic match just weeks before Souness resigned.

As you can see, Ian Rush still ranks at 100%, even though, by the start of 1994 the transfer record had increased; the fact remained that in 1988, Liverpool had had to pay the greatest amount of money of any English club at the time to bring back their star striker.

After all, setting a new transfer record is all about moving heaven and earth to get your man, and taking him off the open market at the same time. If Liverpool had refused to pay £2.8m to bring back Rush, another English club would have moved in. And while Souness didn't buy Rush, he had the luxury of a player deemed

good enough to once break the British transfer record. Of course, by 1994, Rush, now well into his 30s, was worth nowhere near a British record, but he was at Liverpool, and nowhere else, because such a fee was once paid. Crucially, for numerous reasons he was worth infinitely more to the club than any nominal fee would bring for a player of his age.

That side from 1994 is the second-most 'expensive' Liverpool Strongest XI found when calculating the figures for *Dynasty*. The most expensive was the side that contested the 1996 FA Cup

Final:

David James

30%

(1992)

Jason McAteer

60%

(1995)

John Scales

70%

(1994)

Mark Wright

76%

(1991)

Phil Babb

72%

(1994)

Rob Jones

10%

(1991)

John Barnes

60%

(1987)

Jamie Redknapp

12%

(1991)

Steve McManaman

0%

YTS

Stan Collymore

100%

(1995)

Robbie Fowler

0%

YTS

Total Average

44.5%

The First Time is the Hardest

When considering Liverpool's championship challenge, it has to be acknowledged that winning the 'first' title is always the hardest. ('First' meaning after a significant gap; basically, however long it takes for there to be a new manager and/or a different set of players

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—so a minimum of five years, but usually far longer.)

Any team yet to win the league obviously does not possess the vital experience of having already done so, even if one or two individuals might. Liverpool have proven winners in all the cups, and the coaching staff is replete with winners of league titles: Benítez, Pellegrino and Lee know the drill only too well. The latter pair both know what it feels like to do so as a player, and they can pass their experience on to their charges; which, after all, is what coaches are there to do.

But a lack of experience in these situations is likely to lead to increased nerves, as the pressure will be new; after all, sportsmen have to gradually acclimatise to an increase in pressure over the course of their careers. For a footballer this pressure starts at a

young age, and grows with his first appearance in the reserves, his first-team debut, his first run of games, and so on. That doesn't mean nerves disappear and pressure abates, but it's about learning to better handle them.

It's all a process of getting used to what is expected. Some youngsters appear to play without fear, but it's a rare individual who doesn't feel any pressure whatsoever. It's why players who excel with one club can falter when moved to another club in the same league, especially for a big fee. As soon as more is expected of you, you are pushed beyond your comfort zone. This can bring the best out of top players, but it only needs two or three others to struggle and a team can falter.

Several of Liverpool's players have played in a number of major finals, including the Champions League. This helps them deal with bigger games. But it does not reduce the pressure of a club like Liverpool being expected to win the Premiership. Fabio Aurélio has league-winners' medals from Spain, Javier Mascherano has two Olympic golds, and the quartet of Pepé Reina, Alvaro Arbeloa, Xabi Alonso and Fernando Torres became European Champions with their country, although only the latter pair played significant roles.

This all helps their individual self-belief, but there is no better way of proving to yourself that you are capable of achieving a specific aim than having done it in the past. And nothing can

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beat the collective psychological belief of a team, which is far more complex than the state of mind of any single individual. Just watch how certain successful players struggle for their countries, particularly if the mindset of that unit is more fragile.

A team like Manchester United has that experience in the bag.

The longest they have gone without a title in the Premiership era is three years. Having continuity with the same manager, it often

meant that only a few players were new to the experience, and they could be carried through by the belief of the others; Rooney and Ronaldo hadn't won a league title in their first couple of seasons, but Ferdinand, Giggs, Scholes, Neville, *et al*, had. Also, the players won't look at Alex Ferguson and ask themselves "can he really deliver a league title?" in the way some at Liverpool reportedly did about Gérard Houllier. But as has been documented many times, Ferguson's overall record was very poor in his first four seasons, and doubtless there were questions in the minds of plenty of United players during that period, just as there were serious doubts amongst the fans. It was only once he finally reached the summit that he was taken totally seriously; although by finishing as runnersup in 1991/92, after his first title challenge, a sense of real belief will have been growing.

Throughout last season, United could call upon 22 players with Premiership-winning experience. Chelsea had eleven (although Ashley Cole won his at Arsenal), and Arsenal five, with Mikael Silvestre and William Gallas having gained theirs at United and Chelsea respectively. Surprisingly, joint-third in terms of league winners were Portsmouth, who had four ex-Arsenal players (including Jermaine Pennant) and Glen Johnson, who won the league with Chelsea —and who, of course, now adds that experience to Liverpool's ranks. Woeful Newcastle were 5th on the list, with Nicky Butt, Damien Duff, Alan Smith and Geremi in their ranks, while fellow relegatedes Middlesbrough boasted Robert Huth, who was a fringe member during Chelsea's back-to-back titles. In some of these cases, the players weren't particularly key to their former teams' success.

Perhaps Portsmouth overachieved under Harry Redknapp in part because of the understanding and experience gained by his

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ex-Arsenal quartet, but time was always running out on them in the long term. Newcastle's lacklustre efforts to escape the drop

with four Champions in their number suggests prior experience of winning the title on an individual level isn't that important, and that it's collective success that really matters.

As I've been noting for four years now, 'new' league winners in the Premiership era have finished 2nd (or joint-2nd on points) the year before finally winning the trophy. It is this achievement, as a team that builds the necessary confidence and adds the experience of the fight for the prize. Having big-game players, and those with experience of lifting —or masterminding the winning of —trophies, cannot hurt a club's chances. But collective belief is the key.

So all of this adds up to the first title being the hardest to land.

Defending it may be seen as tougher still, but that is a one-season phenomenon, when you become a greater scalp. Retain it or not, you are set up as a serious proposition, and likely to challenge again the following year, once the pressure of defending the title has eased. Back-to-back successes are becoming increasingly common of late, so perhaps it's not as tough as some suggest —the confidence gained from winning it outweighing the pressure of defending it.

Other Pressures

Spending lots of money will also create its own pressure. There's no doubt that more attention is lavished on the costlier players, with the media and baying rival fans queueing up to shout "what a waste of money". But it's a drawback that every manager will accept if given the option, because above all else, money buys freedom. It buys the best players, and gives a manager greater choice in who to sign. Every manager will make good and bad signings across all price ranges, but the greater the number of expensive players he buys, the more likely it is that he'll end up with a number of successes who make that telling difference.

However, even this is possibly not as weighty as 'historical' pressure, which big clubs can labour under, or even 'rabid

supporter' pressure, which applies to a club like Newcastle, whose

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history doesn't necessarily match the expectations of their fans.

(Every time I come to write a book I think of Newcastle: they often supply the perfect example of *how not to do things*, and this year they took it to the extreme.)

All supporters want *more*, it's part of the greed of being a fan, where one-upmanship is all-important. But if expectations of its fans exceed realistic levels by too great an amount, a poisonous atmosphere develops. Dissatisfaction spreads, discontent becomes rife. This transmits itself to players, particularly given that the crowd will tend to become restless in games earlier than it has a right to. Just look at the vitriol directed at various Newcastle managers in the last few seasons, and the booing that erupted early in games. This helped lead to the dire situation they found themselves in at the end of the season. They considered their club too good for Sam Allardyce —and far be it from me to defend the rotund-headed ex-Bolton manager —but they didn't really give him a chance; soon they ended up with Joe Kinnear of all people. It might as well have been Roy Kinnear, the deceased roly-poly English comic actor, such was the plight they found themselves in. Their top-flight stay ended when Alan Shearer managed them without distinction to the drop. You can't really blame Shearer, although he did surprisingly little to lift the place. But this minihistory encapsulates why having patience with a manager is crucial, and how fans often don't know best, especially when ruled by their hearts: see Kevin Keegan's ill-fated return, and total rookie Alan Shearer's failure to even remotely slow the list of a sinking ship. Was Allardyce the man to bring the glory days back (and I use the word 'back' tentatively) to Newcastle? No. But he would surely have made them a stable, hard-working mid-table side. The Geordie supporters felt that their team was better —or deserved to be better —than it actually was. They felt their club

had a right to be in the Champions League, when in truth it was only earning the right to be in the Championship. Their brilliant passion blinds them.

Liverpool fans were very similar in the early Benítez years, and some still see it as the club's *right* to win the league. At the point at which Benítez arrived, Liverpool were so far adrift of such

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realities, it was wrong to expect anything even approaching a title challenge. At best the Reds were only half a team. Improvements have to be gradual, and now, while Liverpool still lack the money that guarantees unstinting squad strength and the ability to solve major problems mid-season, the Reds have earned the right, step by step, to enter the mix.

There's one other type of pressure that can damage a club's chances of winning the title: the desire of the fans to see a certain style of football. Again, Newcastle fit into this category; I certainly have sympathy for their dislike of Allardyce's football, but beggars can't be choosers, and until they are stable as a club, with a firm direction on and off the pitch, then they will struggle.

This is also tied in to the perception that more attractive football equals greater success. However, sometimes there has to be a compromise, particularly if a club cannot afford the world's most skilful players. Beautiful football cannot be turned on and off like a tap. While you need skill allied to work-rate to win the league, Stoke's primitive style saw them enjoy a far better season than some of the supposed purists who languished below them. Again, the Potters' style is not to most people's taste, but it gives them a platform to build on. Gradually, better players can be introduced, and different tactics evolved.

West Ham, Spurs and Everton arguably have a greater history for attractive football than of success, although Everton long ago abandoned the 'school of science' for the 'dogs of war'. Manchester

United are another of the country's supposed institutions of flair, dating back to the days of Sir Matt Busby. And yet, despite some stylish sides in the past 17 years, they haven't won all of their league titles by being the very best footballing side.

By contrast, Arsenal, pre-Arsène Wenger, and Liverpool, prior to the wonderful 1987/88 side, had a reputation for pragmatism; this is not to say that they didn't play very good football, merely that they weren't afraid to mix it up, or build from the platform of clean sheets. There were cloggers and stoppers, artisans as well as artists.

It seems that once you give fans a certain brand of exhilarating football they do not want to go back to a more perfunctory style;

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a bit like the prospect of returning to a Skoda after a year in a Mercedes. It also doesn't help if your rivals are winning plaudits for the way they play; bragging rights aren't just about results, but aesthetics too. No Liverpool fan enjoyed the 'hoof' hollers from Arsenal supporters at the start of the decade, as the Reds launched frequent long balls—either in hope, or just pure blind panic. Few Kopites cared on those occasions when the Gunners were beaten in spite of their beautiful ball retention and Gallic flair, but you need to win a lot of games playing perfunctory football to keep the fans happy. And even then, the patience begins to wear thin. Win, lose or draw, Liverpool fans still resented the mocking taunts of the Londoners.

All of this adds to the pressure that builds up around a club. If you offered Liverpool fans the chance to win all 38 league games with boring 1-0s, they'd take it like a shot; at least the first time around. Once success is achieved, the demand switches to repeating it with greater style. Of course, there should be attempts from the manager to evolve the style, to improve the all-round qualities of the team, such a change needs to be gradual.

If Liverpool were to win the first five games of the season 1-0, in a boring, ugly fashion, the mood would not be euphoria. A good percentage of fans will still predict doom, because, they believe, if you play that way you will eventually come unstuck. They may be right; although the act of winning games can in itself lead to better football, as the pressure abates and confidence flows.

This isn't massively dissimilar to Liverpool in 2008/09. The start wasn't as perfect as the example above, but it was impressive all the same in terms of points haul, even if some of the performances were well below par. Some fans remained unhappy, because the team wasn't firing on anything like all cylinders. But as can happen with football, Liverpool's best attacking display came in a game they ended up losing: the first defeat of the season, at Spurs, having taken a 1-0 lead.

Suddenly those fans who were unhappy at performances seemed to be the very ones moaning about the defeat; some claim to have prophesied it, even though it happened in a manner totally contradictory to their prediction. Liverpool were brilliant in all 84

respects bar finishing, and at the other end, the Reds' only two errors were severely punished.

So a certain pressure will always exist for those who desire Utopia, where victory is achieved in great style. Unease will build if you are winning without playing well (even though it is the supposed sign of a good team), and disquiet will spread if you play well but don't win.

Perhaps the truth is as follows: expectations and achievement never really meet; as soon as the desired achievement is attained, the expectations have already raced ahead. And so Stoke, noted for the most vociferous support in the Premiership upon their return, may find those same fans making less noise as they repeat what was once a great adventure, but which, with the novelty wearing

off, becomes a more tiresome game of survival in the bottom half of the table. Instead of seeing achievement as more of the same (which in itself was overachievement), they might start desiring European qualification.

First Success

So who are the teams who have won their 'first' league title during the Premiership era?

First, there was Manchester United, after a 26-year wait.

Blackburn came next, ending an 81-year famine. Arsenal, in only Arsène Wenger's second season, landed the title in 1998, seven years after their previous triumph, although a nucleus of that side remained, making it less of a 'new' triumph. However, it remains worthy of examination all the same: they had a new manager, with new ideas, in a new era. And finally Chelsea, who won the title 50 years after their previous success.

Of these, only Manchester United really compare with Liverpool in any way, given that Arsenal were in transition, and neither Blackburn nor Chelsea were expected to win league titles during their fallow years. The last two clubs in that list did create their own pressure, by spending big, which of course leads to the need to justify that outlay, while outsiders may want them to fail for that very reason.

So how did they achieve these 'first' titles, and put to bed

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decades of misery?

Well, it's clear that each was very well managed. Alex Ferguson, Kenny Dalglish, Arsène Wenger and José Mourinho were all men with notable prior achievements in the game; these were no oneoffs on their part, no first-time titles. Like Benítez, each man was in his 40s when appointed. The last manager to win the championship without a prior top-division title was Howard Wilkinson, in the final year of the old First Division.

But vitally, each success was achieved with very expensive sides.

It seems that once a title is won, youth team players get introduced, and less squad upheaval occurs; team maintenance gets to the pruning stage, with selective tweaks, rather than the ripout-the-garden-and-start-again stage. As such, the cost of the side tends to dip over the following years. But that first success relies on having a team that costs at least as much as the next-best rival. Blackburn are widely regarded as having ‘bought’ success with their 1995 title. Perhaps this was down to the *speed* of the team building, which happened very quickly after Kenny Dalglish took charge in 1991, with the Lancashire club languishing in the old Second Division. In less than three years they had finished as runners-up in the Premiership, and within four they were crowned English champions.

One of the great advantages of wealth in football is the ability to assemble a team almost overnight, rather than adding one or two elements every year and waiting for young players to come through the system. Of course, the less time you give the elements to blend, the more chaotic the process can become; it still takes skill to put a side together in next-to-no time, even if it is clearly a luxury to be able to go out and hand pick the *crème de la crème*. Having said that, the very best players are also the cleverest (on the pitch, at least), and it’s obviously easier to blend sharp thinkers than a collection of cloggers.

It is therefore important to identify whether the wealth, if spent quickly, is simply just raising the value of the side in line with other rivals, who may have taken longer to spend a similar amount —and as such, essentially just levelling the playing field (even if the money may seem ‘unfairly’ bestowed rather than earned by on-field achievement) —or far outstripping them in terms of overall investment.

In the case of Blackburn, it was actually just making them more competitive; bringing them in line with the other top teams of the day. Dalglish deserves particular praise for the quality of his

purchases; despite big fees, there weren't many of the flops that all managers end up with after handing over large cheques. In terms of big deals, José Mourinho also had success at Chelsea, but a fair few flops, too —although the increased emphasis on the squad means that there is not enough room in a team over the course of a season for 24 players all to succeed.

By 1994/95, United, fresh from back-to-back titles, had begun to bring through players like Gary Neville, Paul Scholes, Nicky Butt and David Beckham, with some of Ferguson's earlier purchases moving on. However, into the side had recently come British record signings Roy Keane and Andy Cole. So the side Blackburn were trying to usurp had decreased slightly in terms of expense, but it was the following season, 1995/96, when most of the younger United players cemented their place in the team. (The XI that contested the FA Cup Final against Liverpool cost on average 35% of the transfer record, and the inclusion of the three subs brought this figure down to 28%.)

The strongest XI Dalglish could field at Blackburn cost 41.2%. However, David Batty, signed from Leeds United for £2,750,000 (73%) in October 1993, only played five games due to a broken foot, albeit the crucial final five (Batty was offered a medal but refused, although he clearly played a fairly vital role). In his place for most of the campaign was Mark Atkins, a £45,000 signing from Scunthorpe seven years earlier.

With several fairly expensive players in reserve, the cost of the 18 in the squad who were significantly involved averages out at 35.1%. So this was a 41% team, and a 35% squad.

It went wrong for Blackburn rather quickly thereafter, as Dalglish moved to become Director of Football and Ray Harford (who died prematurely eight years later) was promoted to manager. Manchester United won back-to-back titles, before the emergence of Arsenal under Arsène Wenger.

As explained earlier, Wenger's success was not the result of an entirely new team; a large debt was owed to their triumph seven years earlier. Indeed, rather crucially, *a whole unit* remained from the previous league title, back in 1991 —and a pretty famous and well-drilled one at that. David Seaman, Lee Dixon, Tony Adams, Steve Bould and Nigel Winterburn had formed the parsimonious defence during George Graham's reign, while Martin Keown had been added in 1993. It's unlikely Wenger would have had such instant success without inheriting this legendary back line, even if he did improve their technical play. Ian Wright also remained from that earlier title, playing 24 league games and scoring ten goals despite being edged out by Nicolas Anelka in the second half of the season, while the sublime Dennis Bergkamp had been bought for a British record in 1995. David Platt was another expensive signing from the same time.

As the first top-class foreign coach to manage in England, Wenger had a unique advantage. Providing that his players bought into his continental ideas —which, given the conservative nature of British footballers, was no certainty —then the Gunners would have a distinct edge. By the time other clubs followed suit, Arsenal had made the most of a change to teetotalism, pasta-based diets and the use of sports science (all of which were adopted by other clubs by the turn of the century), while the recruitment of little-known, exceptional young talent from Europe (such as Patrick Vieira and Nicolas Anelka) made a change from securing only those who were fully established or jobbing Scandinavians; here was a man who knew the market at a deeper level, and before long English clubs were scouting with greater emphasis on emerging players from across the globe. However, it still needed the Frenchman's ability to buy the right players to fit in with his brand of beautiful, expansive football, and to have them stand up to the physical

rigours of Premiership football. It was some achievement; but one that cannot be repeated elsewhere.

This is not to say that English football has changed entirely for the better since Wenger's arrival. Indeed, the good and the bad can both be traced back to money.

The top four, through regular Champions League competition,

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have grown stronger and stronger, whilst the rest have benefited from increased television payments such that players are now choosing mid-level English clubs rather than top Italian or Spanish sides. The quality of footballer in the English league has never been stronger, and the world's best managers also want to work in these isles. So far so good.

However, the more money the Premiership generates, the more scared clubs become of relegation. This leads to many seeking simply to stay in the top flight, rather than have any greater ambition. "The Premier League has definitely lost something," said Wenger after a late winner saw his side beat Bolton 1-0 at the Emirates in January 2009. "When I came in 1996, everybody had a go at you and there was space up and down the flanks. Sometimes you lost the game, but you could see more chances than now.

"You go back ten years and everybody played a strict 4-4-2," added Wenger. "This year I can't remember any team coming here with two strikers, except Hull who played like that just at the start [at which point they took a shock lead]. It's maybe one of the weaknesses of the top Premier League sides this year that teams have learned only to defend away from home, the leading clubs have all struggled with that—even Manchester United, with all their offensive force."

But Wenger feels things will change for the better. "What's interesting in the game is that every new problem you face, the teams have to work to find the answer. That problem will only

be temporary I think because it'll force the teams to work on movement, the technique and the creative side. It's important that these teams don't get away with only defending any more and they have to start to take risks as well."

And, of course, 4-5-1 is not automatically negative. As the noted football writer and chronicler of formations Jonathan Wilson states, "formations are neutral"; it's what a manager does with them, the players he chooses in those positions, that make it attacking or defensive. But clearly some of the smaller sides adopt it as a means of protection, rather than a chance for midfielders to flood forward.

Unlike Blackburn's success, Wenger's 1998 title was seen to have

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been achieved on a small budget. But in some ways this viewpoint shows how perceptions can be wrong. Arsenal's strongest XI, particularly at the start of the season, was more expensive than Blackburn's 1995 side, averaging out at 43.1%. However, the overall squad, which was slightly larger in the case of the Londoners, weighed in at 27.6%, almost 8% less expensive. And by the end of the season, with David Platt more of a squad player, and Nicolas Anelka taking over from Ian Wright, the average of the strongest XI had dropped to 31% —although the team that started the FA Cup Final was back up to 44%.

Arsenal's spending had dated back a decade, and was spread across the reigns of three managers, whereas Blackburn's was limited mostly to the previous four years. While Wenger benefited from some of his predecessor's bigger transfer deals, his own purchases weren't too expensive, with only Marc Overmars really tipping the scales to any serious degree.

Like Blackburn, Chelsea's spending was also slightly misleading due to the rapid speed of team assembly. The vast majority of José Mourinho's successful squad was put together in a very short space

of time, making for massive annual spending across two or three years. While Chelsea do top the list for the most expensive Strongest XI found in the Premiership era, it is not by a great distance, as might have been expected; more surprisingly, a Chelsea squad doesn't feature in the top three. Chelsea had the most expensive 'first time'-winners' Strongest XI, but their squad ranked only third out of the four clubs who qualify for this competition. Perhaps this is because even the biggest squads these days have a number of 'fringe' players, who are only really there for emergencies. Having said that, home-grown lads who played no significant part in a season were excluded from all analysis; despite squad numbers, the sheer number of them can skew all the averages, when in many cases they are only considered for the League Cup at best.

Chapter Seven

The History of Premiership Success

So what have been the most expensive teams assembled during the Premiership era? Are they as expected, or more surprising? And did that money ‘buy’ them any success?

The following tables list the relative costs of the major squads and strongest XIs in the Premiership era: sides that have either won the league for finished as runners-up, with a couple of extra Liverpool sides from the ‘90s thrown in for comparison. There are 36 different ‘teams’ included, with extra emphasis on the ‘big four’ over recent seasons. Other clubs may have had setups more expensive in certain years than some of the ‘big four’ —for instance, Spurs Strongest XI in recent years has cost far more than Arsenal’s —but none of those excluded will have rated anywhere near the top of the list. In other words, no extremely expensive side has flopped massively, while some teams, like Leeds United’s from the early part of the decade, had a lot of home-grown players to lower the average.

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Strongest XIs —Average Cost: Premiership Era

Club and Year

Strongest XI Position Points

1

Chelsea 2007/08

51.9

2

85

=

Chelsea 2006/07

51.9

2

83

3

Chelsea 2005/06

50.2

1

91

4

Newcastle 1995/96

49.0

2

78

5

Man Utd 1991/92

46.3

1

71

(78)

6

Man Utd 1993/94

45.4

1

83

(92)

7

Chelsea 2008/09

45.1

3

83

8

Chelsea 2004/05

44.6

1

95

9

Man Utd 2005/06

44.5

2

83

=

Liverpool 1995/96 **

44.5

3

71

11

Man Utd 2002/03

43.5

1

83

=

Liverpool 1993/94

43.5

8

54

(60)

13

Arsenal 1997/98

43.1

1

78

14

Man Utd 2008/09

42.9

1

90

15

Arsenal 2001/02

42.8

1

87

16

Man United 2001/02

42.4

2

77

Average First-Time Winners 41.9

17

Blackburn 1994/95

41.2

1

81

(89)

Average Premiership Champions 40.4

Average Non-First-Time Winners 40.0

18

Man Utd 2000/01

39.1

1

80

19

Man Utd 1998/99

39.0

1

79

20

Man Utd 1992/93

38.7

1

76

(84)

21

Man Utd 1999/00

37.4

1

91

22

Man Utd 1995/96

36.5

1

82

23

Arsenal 2002/03

36.4

2

78

24

Man Utd 2007/08

36.0

1

87

25

Man Utd 2006/07

35.4

1

89

26

Chelsea 2003/04

34.6

2

79

27

Man Utd 1997/98

33.5

2

77

28

Man Utd 1996/97

33.3

1

75

29

Arsenal 2003/04

32.2

1

90

30

Arsenal 2004/05

27.5

3

83

31

Liverpool 2008/09

25.2

2

86

32

Arsenal 2007/08

18.5

3

83

33

Liverpool 2001/02

17.9

2

80

34

Liverpool 2005/06

17.0

3

82

35

Arsenal 2008/09

16.5

4

72

38 games, unless stated. Points from 42 games decreased on pro-rata basis, actual total in brackets.

****Most expensive Liverpool side of all time in relation to transfer record.**

'First-time' winners in bold.

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This initial table makes for pretty dramatic reading. First, it shows the massive gulf between the cost of Manchester United's Strongest XI last season, and Liverpool's —almost 20% more, and not that far off being twice as costly in relative terms.

Perhaps most tellingly, it shows that the average of the 17 Premiership-era champions is 30.8% for a Squad, and 40.4% for a Strongest XI. Quite substantial figures.

And as if to confirm the notion that the first title is the hardest to win, the average of those particular United, Blackburn, Arsenal and Chelsea Squads is roughly 5% higher in each case than their respective costs in the other 13 seasons, and their Strongest XIs are 2% higher. In other words, it took *even more* money to win it

for that difficult first time.

Looking at all 17 English champions between 1993 and 2009, not a single Strongest XI cost as little as Liverpool's 2008/09 setup, only one squad had a lower percentage, and even that was fractional. Indeed, in terms of Strongest XIs, Liverpool were a full 7% behind the cheapest-ever Premiership winners, who were Arsenal's 2003/04 'Invincibles'.

This puts into context just how big an ask it is to win the title without serious financial clout. It may be possible to do so, but the facts suggest that it's not *easy*. Far from it. The introduction of Glen Johnson to the Reds' XI lowers that gap with that Arsenal side to just 3%, and his quality, if he settles, will clearly help Liverpool's title bid —providing other key players are retained. Of course, the list also shows that three of the four most expensive XIs (and six of the top ten) seen in the modern league format actually failed to win the title, while the two most expensive sides in Liverpool's history, both from the '80s, proved two of its least successful —although at least the 1995/96 vintage showed some promise. However, that side had an incredibly expensive squad cost —from all those assessed since the Premiership began in 1992, it comes out *top* in relative terms. Liverpool fans therefore cannot claim that it was paucity that allowed Manchester United to run away with things in the early years of the Premiership; but as the '90s progressed, Liverpool got relatively poorer as United, due to success on the pitch at the precise point that the financial

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rewards increased, coupled with clever (and/or exploitative) marketing, went into overdrive.

That particular side also highlights the problems inherent in changing managers, with the squad a mixed bag of costly buys by both Roy Evans and his predecessor, Graeme Souness. It could be argued that Evans had to spend big money to dig the club out of the

hole Souness had helped create, but his own signings left a lot to be desired in the long term, even if players like Stan Collymore, John Scales and Jason McAteer all shone at times during that particular season, and Phil Babb showed occasional glimpses of why he was Britain's most expensive defender (just never any lasting evidence). Still in the squad were Neil Ruddock, who at least played a part in the season, but also Nigel Clough and Paul Stewart, neither of whom contributed anything significant (Clough two league games, Stewart none).

It's fair to say that Evans would rather have had two '£20m+' players (by today's standards) who were a darn sight better. Why couldn't Souness instead have signed Roy Keane and Alan Shearer? It shows that one manager's bad buys can somewhat tie the hands of his successor, as Evans was left with once-valuable players whom he could not sell; the club effectively 'gave away' Stewart in March 1996 to get him out of the door after a number of loan spells.

Within a year, Liverpool's squad cost percentage had dropped dramatically, with Rush (100%), Stewart (70%), Clough (61%) and Scales (70%) all leaving the club. By 1997, John Barnes (60%) and Stan Collymore (100%) had also exited, as youngsters like Michael Owen, Jamie Carragher and David Thompson came through the ranks, further lowering the average cost.

However, the days of the 60%+ signings at Liverpool had more or less passed. Players like Karl-Heinz Riedle, Steve Staunton and Sean Dundee all arrived for inexpensive fees. Ten players ranging from 60-100% of the transfer record had been purchased (six by Souness, four by Evans) between 1991 and 1995 —precisely half of those in that high-end range *in the club's entire history* (to July 2009), snapped up within just a four-year period, to nestle in the Reds' top 20 biggest buys with the likes of Kenny Dalglish, Peter Beardsley, Ian Rush and Graeme Souness. In the 14 years since, only three

more have been procured: Fernando Torres (75% in 2007), Emile Heskey (73% in 2000) and Robbie Keane (66% in 2008). (Glen Johnson's fee works out at 53%, which places him joint 27th in the Liverpool list, along with Dietmar Hamann and Christian Ziege.) Therefore the closest the club has come to breaking the transfer record since the purchase of Stan Collymore is still 25% shy. With this in mind, it's almost nothing short of a miracle that the Reds have improved to their best level for 20 years.

Given that Rafa Benítez has had only two top-class youth team graduates to utilise (Carragher and Gerrard), compared with the minimum of three or four that were in the side from the mid'90s to 2004, he has clearly been doing a lot of things right to get

such impressive results on a relatively limit budget. His 2008/09 squad came way down in 30th place (out of 36) in terms of average cost per player (%) out of those examined in this study, and contained only one player bought by a predecessor: Sami Hyypiä. So the make-up of this side was largely his doing. No squad with a lower average cost has racked up as many as 86 points, although United's 2006/07 side, which was on average marginally cheaper (on account of the greater numbers of home-grown talent), did win the league.

Squads – Average Cost: Premiership Era

Club and Year

Strongest XI Position Points

1

Man Utd 1993/94

45.6

1

83

(92)

2

Liverpool 1995/96**

45.3

3

71

3

Man Utd 1992/93

39.5

1

76

(84)

4

Chelsea 2005/06

39.0

1

91

5

Newcastle 1995/96

37.7

2

78

6

Chelsea 2006/07

37.3

2

83

7

Man Utd 1991/92

36.0

2

71

(78)

8

Man Utd 1995/96

35.9

1

92

9

Blackburn 1994/95

35.1

1

81

(89)

10

Liverpool 1993/94

33.8

8

54

(60)

Average First-Time Winners 33.7

11

Arsenal 2001/02

33.5

1

87

12

Chelsea 2004/05

32.5

1

95

13

Chelsea 2007/08

32.2

2

85

95

14

Man United 2001/02

30.6

2

77

15

Chelsea 2008/09

30.3

3

83

Average Premiership Champions 30.0

16

Arsenal 2002/03

29.4

2

78

17

Chelsea 2003/04

29.3

2

79

Average Non-First-Time Winners 28.9

18

Man Utd 1998/99

28.0

1

77

19

Arsenal 1997/98

27.6

1

78

20

Man Utd 2000/01

27.6

1

91

21

Man Utd 2008/09

26.7

1

90

22

Man Utd 1999/00

26.4

1

79

23

Man Utd 2002/03

26.1

1

80

24

Man Utd 2005/06

25.8

2

83

25

Man Utd 2007/08

25.2

1

87

26

Man Utd 1997/98

24.6

2

75

27

Man Utd 1996/97

24.4

1

82

28

Man Utd 2007/08

24.2

1

89

29

Arsenal 2003/04

23.2

1

90

30

Liverpool 2008/09

20.5

2

86

31

Man Utd 2006/07

19.7

1

83

32

Arsenal 2004/05

19.2

3

83

33

Liverpool 2005/06

16.2

3

82

34

Liverpool 2001/02

14.4

2

80

35

Arsenal 2008/09

11.7

4

72

36

Arsenal 2007/08

9.7

3

83

38 games, unless stated. Points from 42 games decreased on pro-rata basis, actual total in brackets.

****Most expensive Liverpool side of all time in relation to transfer record.**

'First-time' winners in bold.

In terms of average cost, Liverpool's 2008/09 squad was still a long way behind the least-expensive 'first time' winners, and 13.5% behind the average 'first time' champions.

Value For Money

So what do you get when you divide the points won in a season by the average cost (as a percentage) of the players involved? While there are lots of variables that cannot be included —just one being how points are almost certainly easier to win in certain seasons than others —it does however give an indication of how much a

club is punching above, or below, its financial weight.

The first surprise from this analysis (see tables overleaf) is that the best results from a Strongest XI out of the 36 different teams
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assessed is Rafa Benítez's from his second season, when the Reds finished 3rd with 82 points with a relatively inexpensive side. Of course, teams with far lower spends will have won points at a far higher far higher ratio (such as those promoted sides who finish in mid-table with a squad that cost precious little) but out of all those who challenged—or were expected to challenge—for the title in the past 17 years, Liverpool's 2005/06 Strongest XI came out top, pound for pound.

But easily the most impressive team to come out of this particular analysis is the Arsenal side that led the table for so much of 2007/08, before ultimately falling away from spring onwards. Attaining 83 points with such an inexpensive team is placed into clear focus: it was an achievement in itself. That the squad was *by some distance* the least expensive makes it all the more impressive. Indeed, both Arsenal and Liverpool lead the way in terms of what has been achieved on a limited budget, with Gérard Houllier's 2001/02 setup coming third in both categories, and Liverpool's most recent side finishing 5th.

So what does this prove? As ever, that's hard to say. Chelsea and Manchester United might argue that they could have still won their league titles even if they'd spent less money; but it's easier to say that with the safety blanket of numerous expensive players. It might have transpires that they didn't need so many costly players, but if they have the money in the bank they will almost always try to buy some 'insurance'.

Having won two and three Premiership titles respectively since 2004, they will feel that the ends will justify the means. They can also point to teams like Liverpool's and Newcastle's in the mid'90s as evidence that spending money does not in itself bring

success —it obviously needs to be spent wisely.

However, what the figures show is this: if you take two equally gifted managers with evenly-matched squads and give one twice as much money as the other, it's almost certain you can predict who will prevail. It all comes back the Formula One model: until you put all the drivers in the same cars, you cannot judge who is the best driver. After all, just as you can't win a Grand Prix in a mini, nor (it's clear) can you win the Premiership on a shoestring.

97

Strongest XI – Premiership Points Per Percentage (of Transfer Record)

Club and Year

Strongest XI Position Points

PPPP

1

Liverpool 2005/06

17.0

3

82

4.82

2

Arsenal 2007/08

18.5

3

83

4.49

3

Liverpool 2001/02

17.9

2

80

4.47

4

Arsenal 2008/09

16.5

4

72

4.36

5

Liverpool 2008/09

25.2

2

86

3.41

6

Arsenal 2004/05

27.5

3

83

3.02

7

Arsenal 2003/04

32.2

1

90

2.80

8

Man Utd 2006/07

35.4

1

89

2.51

9

Man Utd 1999/00

37.4

1

91

2.43

10 Man Utd 2007/08

36.0

1

87

2.42

11 Man Utd 1997/98

33.5

2

77

2.30

12 Chelsea 2003/04

34.6

2

79

2.28

13 Man Utd 1996/97

33.3

1

75

2.25

14 Man Utd 1995/96

36.5

1

82

2.25

15 Arsenal 2002/03

36.4

2

78

2.14

16 Chelsea 2004/05

44.6

1

95

2.13

17 Man Utd 2008/09

42.9

1

90

2.09

18 Man Utd 2000/01

39.1

1

80

2.05

19 Arsenal 2001/02

42.8

1

87

2.03

20 Man Utd 1998/99

39.0

1

79

2.03

21 Blackburn 1994/95

41.2

1

81

1.97

(89)

22 Man Utd 1992/93

38.7

1

76

1.96

(84)

23 Man Utd 2002/03

43.5

1

83

1.91

24 Man Utd 2005/06

44.5

2

83

1.87

25 Chelsea 2008/09

45.1

3

83

1.84

26 Man Utd 1993/94

45.4

1

83

1.83

(92)

27 Man United 2001/02

42.4

2

77

1.82

28 Chelsea 2005/06

50.2

1

91

1.81

29 Arsenal 1997/98

43.1

1

78

1.81

30 Chelsea 2007/08

51.9

2

85

1.64

31 Chelsea 2006/07

51.9

2

83

1.60

32 Newcastle 1995/96

49.0

2

78

1.59

33 Man Utd 1991/92

46.3

1

71

1.53

(78)

38 games, unless stated. Points from 42 games decreased on pro-rata basis, actual tally in brackets.

****Most expensive Liverpool side of all time in relation to transfer record.**

'First-time' winners in bold.

98

Squads – Premiership Points Per Percentage

(of Transfer Record)

Club and Year

Strongest XI Position Points

PPPP

1

Arsenal 2007/08

10.6

3

83

7.83

2

Arsenal 2008/09

12.6

4

72

5.65

3

Liverpool 2001/02

14.4

2

80

5.56

4

Liverpool 2005/06

16.2

3

82

5.06

5

Arsenal 2004/05

19.2

3

83

4.32

6

Liverpool 2008/09

20.2

2

86

4.26

7

Man Utd 2006/07

19.7

1

83

4.21

8

Arsenal 2003/04

23.2

1

90

3.88

9

Man Utd 2007/08

24.2

1

89

3.68

10 Man Utd 2007/08

25.2

1

87

3.45

11 Man Utd 2008/09

26.7

1

90

3.37

12 Man Utd 1996/97

24.4

1

82

3.36

13 Man Utd 2000/01

27.6

1

91

3.30

14 Man Utd 2005/06

25.8

2

83

3.22

15 Man Utd 2002/03

26.1

1

80

3.07

16 Man Utd 1997/98

24.6

2

75

3.05

17 Man Utd 1999/00

26.4

1

79

2.99

18 Chelsea 2004/05

32.5

1

95

2.92

19 Arsenal 1997/98

27.6

1

78

2.83

20 Man Utd 1998/99

28.0

1

77

2.75

21 Chelsea 2008/09

30.3

3

83

2.74

22 Chelsea 2003/04

29.3

2

79

2.70

23 Arsenal 2002/03

29.4

2

78

2.65

24 Chelsea 2007/08

32.2

2

85

2.64

25 Arsenal 2001/02

33.5

1

87

2.60

26 Man Utd 1995/96

35.9

1

92

2.56

27 Man United 2001/02

30.6

2

77

2.52

28 Chelsea 2005/06

39.0

1

91

2.33

29 Blackburn 1994/95

35.1

1

81

2.31

(89)

30 Chelsea 2006/07

37.3

2

83

2.23

31 Newcastle 1995/96

37.7

2

78

2.07

32 Man Utd 1991/92

36.0

2

71

1.97

(78)

33 Man Utd 1992/93

39.5

1

76

1.92

(84)

34 Man Utd 1993/94

45.6

1

83

1.82

(92)

35 Liverpool 1993/94

33.8

8

54

1.60

(60)

36 Liverpool 1995/96

45.3

3

71

1.57

38 games, unless stated. Points from 42 games decreased on pro-rata basis, actual tally in brackets.

***Most expensive Liverpool side of all time in relation to transfer record.*

'First-time' winners in bold.

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Chapter Eight

Wages and Wherewithal

The one big expense that is always overlooked when discussing the wealth of a club is wages. Fans will often make calculations based on transfer fees but fail to consider that a £30m player can also cost £30m in wages over a five year period.

If you don't have as much wealth as other teams, but are expected to compete, then you need to find special men who put football before their wallet. Fernando Torres is such a player: he has a deep respect for the manager, loves the club and its fans, and has stated that he'd rather earn less money and be happy than be "greedy" and go elsewhere. Of course, he gets well remunerated for his efforts, and earned a pay rise in 2009 that didn't extend his contract beyond 2013, but which included the option of a further year. Even so, he could have earned a lot more elsewhere, but his character and loyalty had already been seen at Atletico Madrid, where he stayed longer than many expected.

But these types of players —world-class but humble —are as rare as Halley's Comet sightings coinciding with a solar eclipse and a Sean Dundee goal. If it's hard enough for a manager to find

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the player he wants, it's harder still to broker a deal that suits all parties if unable to pay the going rate.

And so Liverpool remain well adrift of the other big payers, as can be seen in the table below, which is based on the most recent set of financial figures in the public domain. Liverpool have handed out a few pay rises to players in the meantime, but the other big clubs have done the same for some of their stars.

Annual Wage Bill

Wages

1

Chelsea

£149.0m

2

Manchester United

£121.1m

3

Arsenal

£101.3m

4

Liverpool

£89.7m

5

Newcastle United

£74.6m

6

Portsmouth

£54.7m

7

Manchester City

£54.2m

8

Tottenham Hotspur

£52.9m

9

Aston Villa

£50.4m

10

Everton

£44.5m

11

West Ham

£44.2m

12

Blackburn Rovers

£39.7m

13

Fulham

£39.3m

14

Bolton Wanderers

£39.0m

15

Wigan Athletic

£38.4m

16

Sunderland

£37.0m

17

Middlesbrough

£34.8m

18

West Bromwich Albion*

£21.8m

19

Stoke City*

£11.9m

20

Hull City*

£6.9m

** based on season in Championship*

All figures taken from each club's most recently published accounts.

The table clearly highlights the gulf in spending power: Chelsea were paying more in annual wages for the year to 30 June 2008 than *the cost of the entire Liverpool squad that ended the 2008/09 season.*

One potential problem the Premiership faces is the new 50% English tax law for annual earners of more than £150,000; by comparison, Spain cut taxes in the top bracket to 23% for the first five years of employment —originally to encourage top business
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executives to the country, but was expanded to footballers when David Beckham moved to Real Madrid in 2003. This will benefit the big Spanish clubs when it comes to luring the top players (therefore an issue with Liverpool's battle to retain *La Liga* targets Xabi Alonso and Javier Mascherano), and also means that a club like Manchester City, where money is no object, can pay extra to overcome the deficit in a player's pay packet. There were reports of City offering Samuel Eto'o a mind boggling £250,000 a week to try and bring him to the Eastlands from Barcelona, which highlights how far they are prepared to go.

English clubs will now have to increase players' wages to overcome the shortfall that has occurred since their original contracts were signed —although in the case of Fernando Torres, Steven Gerrard, Dirk Kuyt, Yossi Benayoun and Daniel Agger, that has already been addressed by Rafa Benítez.

Money Money Money

It's essential to point out that clubs generate a lot of their own money from standard footballing practices, and therefore have the right to spend it how they see fit without being criticised.

Teams that do well on the pitch obviously tend to benefit in the bank due to the financial rewards on offer, the higher gates that can be attracted and, as popularity spreads, the more merchandise that gets shifted. Good players get sold for large fees, and often that money gets pumped back into the side.

But as is the way with the credit culture, money is also often borrowed against future earnings; indeed, borrowed to *create* future earnings. Take out a loan to buy a better team, and that team will repay in a number of ways. Speculate to accumulate. Or borrow for boom and bust.

Whether or not people feel that clubs like Chelsea, with their gold-plated benefactor (and, to date, terribly unprofitable business model), or United, with their mega-merchandising and prawn sandwich sales, *deserve* these riches is not really the point of this book. It's up to individuals to decide if it's right or wrong; moral or immoral; good or bad for the soul of the game. The point

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of this book is to look at how success on the pitch is achieved with whatever money filters through to the manager, to allow him to build a title-winning team. How a club generates its transfer budget is of course relevant, but ultimately managers get judged on what their teams achieve. Yet the playing field is never remotely level.

Stadia Size

The 'classic' form of football revenue is money paid at the turnstiles, and all its modern variants. TV and achievement money now outstrips this, but it remains a big part of the pie. Just looking at the capacities of last season's Premiership stadia (below) shows the greater earning power of a number of sides; not to mention how clubs like Arsenal and Chelsea charge a lot more for tickets, too.

Size of Stadium

Team

Stadium

Capacity

1

Manchester United

Old Trafford

76,212

2

Arsenal

Emirates Stadium

60,432

3

Newcastle United

St James' Park

52,387

4

Sunderland

Stadium of Light

49,000

5

Manchester City

City of Manchester Stadium

47,726

6 Liverpool

Anfield

45,362

7

Aston Villa

Villa Park

42,640

8

Chelsea

Stamford Bridge

42,055

9

Everton

Goodison Park

40,157

10 Tottenham Hotspur

White Hart Lane

36,240

11 West Ham United

Upton Park

35,303

12 Middlesbrough

Riverside Stadium

35,100

13 Blackburn Rovers

Ewood Park

31,367

14 Stoke City

Britannia Stadium

28,000

15 Bolton Wanderers

Reebok Stadium

27,879

16 Fulham

Craven Cottage

26,500

17 Hull City

KC Stadium

25,404

18 West Bromwich Albion

The Hawthorns

25,369

19 Wigan Athletic

JJB Stadium

25,138

20 Portsmouth

Fratton Park

20,224

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Accounted For

The following table lists the 20 clubs' turnovers as listed in each club's most recently published accounts. The gulf in match-day revenue between Liverpool and the three wealthiest clubs is perhaps the most dramatic figure (although Chelsea's income was published as one overall sum that also included TV/broadcasting earnings).

It is clear why the new stadium is crucial to Liverpool's long-term financial plan, but its construction appears further away than ever before, with work unlikely to begin before 2012, if at all.

Accounts

Turnover Gate/match-day TV Commercial/ Wage bill Wages, proportion Profit/Loss Debts
£Ms

£Ms £Ms misc. £Ms

£Ms of turnover % before tax £Ms £Ms

Man United

256.2

101.5

90.7

64.0

121.1

47.0

-44.8

699.0

Arsenal

222.0

95.0

68.0

31.0

101.3

45.0

36.7

416.0

Chelsea

213.6

(189.8) 189.8

5.3

149.0

68.0

-84.5

701.0#

Liverpool

159.0

39.2

68.3

51.4

89.7

56.4

10.2

300.0•

Tottenham

114.7

28.6

40.3

37.5

52.9

46.0

3.0

65.0

Newcastle

100.8

32.3

41.1

27.4

74.6

74.0

-34.0

106.2##

Man City

82.3

13.6

43.3

25.4

54.2

66.0

-32.6

147.0

Everton

76.0

20.5

46.6

8.9

44.5

59.0

.1

39.0

Aston Villa

75.6

18.5

46.0

11.0

50.4

66.7

-7.6

73.0

Portsmouth

70.5

12.0

51.2

7.3

54.7

78.0

-17.0

57.7

Sunderland

64.0

14.0

36.0

14.0

37.0

57.0

-5.0

63.0

Bolton

59.1

6.8

34.2

14.6

39.0

66.0

-8.4

52.0

West Ham

57.0

17.0

24.0

16.0

44.2

76.0

-22.0

36.0

Blackburn

56.4

6.2

41.2

9.0

39.7

70.0

3.0

17.0

Fulham

53.7

9.6

34.0

10.1

39.3

73.0

3.2

197.0###

Middlesbro

48.0

11.1

27.0

9.9

34.8

73.0

-8.3

93.0

Wigan

43.0

-

-

-

38.4

89.0

-11.2

66.4

West Brom*

27.2

7.0

14.0

6.2

21.8

80.0

11.3

8.9

Stoke City*

11.2

-

-

-

11.9

106.0

-5.6

2.3

Hull City*

9.0

-

-

-

6.9

77.0

-2.0

1.0

• **Kop Holdings net debt on 31 July 2008: £300m. Source BBC**

** From Championship*

£701 owed to Roman Abramovich

£100m owed to Mike Ashley

£174 owed to Al Fayed

All details from most recently filed official information at Companies House.

Debts are borrowings from banks, financial institutions, owners or other sources.

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Chapter Nine

The Glass Ceiling

It's fair to say that every manager comes up against a glass ceiling of one kind or other. There is almost certainly a limit to what any particular team can achieve in any given season. Over time, with clever purchasing and astute tactics, that ceiling can be raised higher and higher. But it cannot be broken through until a lot of work has been undertaken, and often the breakthrough relies on the fortunes of rival teams.

Let's face it: a newly promoted side will now be lucky to finish in the top half of the table. A place in the top four is virtually impossible.

Why?

Because they don't have the wealth, the wherewithal.

So why should Liverpool be expected to bridge a similar gap to land the title?

David Moyes was voted Manager of the Year by his peers for the third time in a handful of years, but what has he actually
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achieved to deserve such acclaim? That's not sarcasm, simply a valid question.

In terms of what he's produced on a limited budget, he's done about as well as anyone has the right to expect; you can't fault him in that respect. But he's won nothing in seven years. He got to one cup final, which is to be applauded, but then so too have a number of managers at similar or smaller clubs (Cardiff and Millwall, to name just two) in the same time-frame. And he took his team to the Champions League in 2005 —or so he thought; the rude awakening of qualifying rounds put paid to those hopes. He's not had fortunes to spend, but he has procured players like Yakubu and

Fellaini for £12m and £15m respectively, so it's not like he's shopping exclusively in the bargain basement. These observations are not to discredit Moyes, whose reputation as one of the game's better managers is deserved. Apart from a couple of horrible seasons, his side have been consistent for a number of years, and is growing fractionally stronger all the time.

But if you're going to reward managers for what they achieve on a limited budget, why wasn't Roy Hodgson at Fulham voted the best? No team improved more than the Cottagers in the whole of England between the final months of 2007/08 and the end of the following season. He took a side from the brink of relegation—a miracle in itself—into Europe, with only four players costing £6m or more, and none as expensive as the two Everton signings mentioned in the previous paragraph. For the past handful of years, Fulham had been a selling club. And he hadn't had the luxury of a long time in the job to buy all the players he wanted, instead he worked with those bought by previous managers, including Lawrie Sanchez, whose long-ball philosophy couldn't have been more different from Hodgson's own. Hodgson literally turned that club, with its tiny stadium, around in the space of 12 short months.

Perhaps it's just a question of perceptions. Liverpool are expected to be at the top of the table. And most of the uninitiated think that Benítez has spent far more money than is actually the case. Moyes was operating on a far lower budget than the top four; but Benítez was operating on a far lower budget than the team directly above and below the Reds in the league.

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Ultimately, the winning of the award is not the point, nor is the Everton connection; I doubt Benítez cares what his peers at the League Managers' Association think, especially as some of them brought their own organisation into disrepute by launching a bizarre personal attack on him. His only aim is the land the

Premiership title. But the award brings into focus the nature of achievement when budgetary constraints —or perceived budgetary constraints —are taken into account.

Of the teams that finished in the European positions (first to seventh), three managers are arguably equal in punching above their weight when achievements are measured against relative expenditure: Benítez, Moyes and Hodgson; of the other ‘limited’ spenders, Arsène Wenger and Martin O’Neill did very well but disappointed in one form or another —Arsenal certainly hadn’t thrilled like they did 12 months earlier, and appeared to be going backwards, while Villa undid months of good work as they tailed off horribly towards the end.

So if the League Managers’ Association is basing its decision on the wider issues beyond simply who won the main trophies —which is a perfectly reasonable way of looking at things —then it seems only fair to more stringently study the performances on those particular terms. As well as a very impressive league campaign, Liverpool again thrilled in Europe, topping their group and thrashing Real Madrid 5-0 on aggregate in the round of 16, having topped their group; easily as impressive overall as Everton reaching the FA Cup Final, if that was another factor.

At least those in Europe appeared to appreciate Benítez’s true worth. In the spring of 2009, the Liverpool manager was voted the best coach in the world by readers of three of the continent’s most prominent sporting newspapers. Spain’s *AS* and *Marca*, plus Italian broadsheet *La Gazzetta dello Sport* conducted online polls to find the best coach in world football. Liverpool’s manager was an overwhelmingly popular figure and came out on top, winning more votes than the likes of Alex Ferguson, José Mourinho, Arsène Wenger, Fabio Capello, Marcello Lippi, Vicente Del Bosque and Josép Guardiola.

“I am really pleased,” Benítez told the club’s official website.

“You cannot say that someone is the best in the world as it’s almost impossible to guarantee that, but at least you have three big newspapers and supporters saying that we as a club are not bad. That for me is very positive because it means our staff are really good and the players are really good. The manager always depends on the players and his staff. You can’t be a good manager if you don’t have a good team behind you. If the supporters say you are doing well it’s because your team, your club is doing well. Clearly it’s nice because it’s supporters from three different countries that voted, and there was also another poll in Germany.”

Value For Money

At £65.2m, Everton boasted the 9th-most expensive squad in the Premiership. When it came to points earned for every million pounds spent on their squad, they ranked 8th. By contrast, Fulham ranked 3rd in that latter table, having had to work with the 14thmost expensive squad in the country. Looked at like this, and

allied to the fact that Hodgson’s side improved by 17 points and ten league places, it seems *almost inconceivable* that anyone but the nomadic English manager should have won the award if based on all-round issues, despite the injury problems Everton suffered.

Of course, hypothetically speaking, there is almost no way that a well-constructed, cleverly managed team of free transfers would end up with zero points over the course of a season, so there’s no real baseline to measure against; it’s not like a manager must have a £40m team to escape relegation. Even the very worst Premiership teams over the years have got into double figures in terms of points, with 25 the post-millennial average for the bottom-placed team, and Derby’s 11 points the exception rather than the rule.

But what *is* the most a cheap side can achieve? Where’s its glass ceiling? And at the top of the table, what’s the *minimum* expense incurred to win the league?

It’s probably fair to say that a team of astutely-sourced free

transfers and a few decent academy talents could feasibly accrue 30-40 points, maybe even more, in the right hands. But it's also true that many free transfers in the Premiership are only realistic options for the biggest clubs, who can pay the larger wages that

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they inevitably attract; the best Bosman players will obviously gravitate towards the best clubs. Hull City were never going to get Michael Ballack on a free, with his desire for Champions League football and wage packet of £121,000 a week.

While a team of free transfers might be able to survive in the Premiership, this book is primarily concerned with the wherewithal needed to *win* the league —or the point at which a challenging club of insufficient funds crashes into the glass ceiling —and that's a whole different issue to simply avoiding the drop or mid-table mediocrity.

What this study shows is that when it comes to spending money, a lot more is needed to make *just a little* headway from mid-table upwards. After all, as the following table shows, no club with a squad that cost below £92m to assemble qualified for the Champions League, and no squad that cost below £65m finished in the top six or registered more than 53 points. It also seems that you can use a selection of players that cost up to £165m and still not even finish above mid-table (as was the case with Manchester City) or get relegated at a cost of almost £90m (Newcastle), but all that proves is that money doesn't guarantee success. However, the figures also show that those teams who are successful have paid a minimum amount for that right. A lot of money doesn't guarantee success, but you *do need a lot of money to achieve success*.

Based on all players registered for a club during the 2008/09 season once the August transfer window shut (therefore not including Dimitar Berbatov on Spurs' roster, given that he made just one substitute appearance for the club before his move to

United), the following table lists the cost of the squads deployed by each club throughout the campaign. Robbie Keane is included in the figures of two clubs —Liverpool and Spurs —as are all other players who moved in the January transfer window.

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Squad Cost 2008/09

Rank

Team

Total Squad Cost

1

Chelsea

£252,910,000

2

Manchester United

£215,400,000

3

Tottenham

£203,800,000

4

Manchester City

£165,950,000

5

Liverpool

£154,040,000

6

Arsenal

£92,075,000

7

Newcastle

£89,000,000

8

Aston Villa

£84,350,000

9

Everton

£65,200,000

10

West Ham

£62,050,000

11

Sunderland

£61,800,000

12

Portsmouth

£47,300,000

13

Middlesbrough

£47,150,000

14

Fulham

£40,000,000

15

Wigan Athletic

£38,450,000

16

West Brom

£32,125,000

17

Bolton Wanderers

£31,900,000

18

Blackburn Rovers

£31,000,000

19

Stoke City
£27,650,000
20

Hull City
£19,285,000

Based solely on the cost of players used over the course of the campaign, Liverpool 'should' have finished 5th in the league; it obviously doesn't work that way, but it highlights the difference in wherewithal with other clubs. In the cases of Spurs and Manchester City, it could be argued that the managers were working with a lot of players they didn't especially want —particularly so in the case of Harry Redknapp, who inherited a ragtag collection of costly signings. Indeed, the Spurs situation is quite reminiscent of Roy Evans' tenure at Liverpool, where his own expensive signings were mixed with the costly deadwood of his predecessor, which is never easy to shift without incurring a massive loss, and certainly can't be done overnight.

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But how many points did each team accrue for every million pounds it spent? The list is as follows:

Points Per £1m Spent

Rank Team

Cost

Prem Points Points-per-£1m

1

Hull City
£19,285,000
35

1.815

2

Stoke City
£27,650,000

45

1.627

3

Fulham

£40,000,000

53

1.325

4

Blackburn Rovers

£31,000,000

41

1.323

5

Bolton Wanderers

£31,900,000

41

1.285

6

Wigan Athletic

£38,450,000

45

1.170

7

West Brom

£32,125,000

32

0.996

8

Everton

£65,200,000

63

0.966

9

Portsmouth

£47,300,000

41

0.867

11

West Ham

£62,050,000

51

0.822

10

Arsenal

£92,075,000

72

0.782

12

Aston Villa

£84,350,000

62

0.735

13

Middlesbrough

£47,150,000

32

0.679

14

Sunderland

£61,800,000

36

0.583

15

Liverpool

£154,040,000

86

0.558

16

Manchester United

£215,400,000

90

0.418

17

Newcastle

£89,000,000

34

0.382

18

Chelsea

£252,910,000

83

0.328

19

Manchester City

£165,950,000

50

0.301

20

Tottenham

£203,800,000

51

0.250

Of course, these squad costs don't give the true 'price' of each transfer at the time it was made. Managers in position for longer will be able to call upon expensive players bought earlier in their reigns, when each £1m went further.

But given that clubs need to spend greater amounts for incremental improvement at the top end of the table —where there's less scope to make a difference —it's no surprise to see the big four in the lower half of this particular list.

Chapter Ten

2008/09 Squads and Strongest XIs

These days it's almost impossible to nail down most teams' best line-ups; therefore, those chosen in this section will inevitably be open to debate. However, all of the 'key core' players are present in each selection, meaning the sides won't be out by much. In terms of squads, only included are those who played a part in the Premiership season, excluding those youth team graduates thrown in on the last day of the season.

Manchester United's team (overleaf) may seem a bit top-heavy with the inclusion of Dimitar Berbatov, Carlos Tevez, Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney, but this is done for a reason: the four seemed crucial to the success of the side, and often ended games together, even if they didn't start them. It was certainly not done to skew the figures: indeed, United's team would have worked out more expensive with the inclusion of either Anderson or Owen Hargreaves in place of Tevez, with Hargreaves the more likely, if he had been fit.

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Liverpool 2008/09

RTS% Year Bought Transfer Fee

José Reina

21

2005

£6,000,000

Fabio Aurélio

0

2006

£0

Martin Škrtel

21

2008

£6,500,000

Jamie Carragher

0

1996

£0

Alvaro Arbeloa

9

2007

£2,640,000

Xabi Alonso

36

2004

£10,500,000

Steven Gerrard

0

1998

£0

Javier Mascherano

60

2007

£18,600,000

Albert Riera

26

2008

£8,000,000

Fernando Torres

66

2007

£23,000,000

Dirk Kuyt

29

2006

£9,000,000

Liverpool Strongest XI

24.4

£84,240,000

Ryan Babel

37

2007

£11,500,000

Robbie Keane

62

2008

£19,000,000

Yossi Benayoun

16

2007

£5,000,000

Lucas Leiva

16

2007

£5,000,000

Sami Hyypiä

17

1999

£2,600,000

Andrea Dossena

23

2008

£7,000,000

David N'Gog

5

2008

£1,500,000

Emiliano Insúa

6

2007

£2,000,000

Damien Plessis

0

2007

£0

Diego Cavalieri

11

2008

£3,500,000

Nabil El Zhar

1

2006

£200,000

Daniel Agger

20

2006

£5,800,000

Jermaine Pennant

22

2006

£6,700,000

Philipp Degen

0

2008

£0

Liverpool Squad

20.2

£154,040,000

Chelsea 2008/09

RTS%

Year Bought

Transfer Fee

Petr Cech

24

2004

£7,000,000

Ashley Cole

52

2006

£16,000,000

Ricardo Carvalho

68

2004

£19,850,000

John Terry

0

1998

£0

José Bosingwa

53

2008

£16,300,000

Michael Essien

84

2005

£24,400,000

Frank Lampard

58

2001

£11,000,000

Deco

26

2008

£8,000,000

Michael Ballack

0

2006

£0

Didier Drogba

82

2004

£24,000,000

Nicolas Anelka

49

2008

£15,000,000

Chelsea Strongest XI

45.1

£141,550,000

Carlo Cudicini

1

1999

£160,000

Paulo Ferreira

45

2004

£13,200,000

Branislav Ivanovic

29

2008

£9,000,000

Florent Malouda

44

2007

£13,500,000

Joe Cole

23

2003

£6,600,000

Solomon Kalou

16

2006

£8,000,000

Franco Di Santo

11

2008

£3,400,000

John Obi Mikel

52

2006

£16,000,000

Hilario

0

2006

£0

Ricardo Quaresma

0

2009

£0

Juliano Belletti

12

2007

£3,700,000

Michael Mancienne

0

2008

£0

Alex

0

2007

£0

Mineiro

0

2008

£0

Miroslav Stoch

0

2008

£0

Andrei Shevchenko (loaned out)

100

2006

£30,800,000

Wayne Bridge

24

2003

£7,000,000

Chelsea Squad

30.5

£252,910,000

113

Arsenal 2008/09

RTS%

Year Bought

Transfer Fee

Manuel Almunia

9

2004

£2,500,000

Gael Clichy

0

2003

£0

Bakary Sagna

24

2007

£7,450,000

William Gallas

16

2006

£5,000,000

Kolo Toure

1

2002

£150,000

Denilson

11

2006

£3,400,000

Samir Nasri

41

2008

£12,700,000

Cesc Fabregas

0

2003

£0

Robin Van Persie

9

2004

£2,750,000

Emanuel Adebayor

24

2006

£7,000,000

Andriy Arshavin

46

2009

£15,000,000

Arsenal Strongest XI

16.5

£55,950,000

Lukasz Fabianski

6

2007

£2,000,000

Johan Djourou

0

2004

£0

Mikael Silvestre

0

2008

£0

Kieran Gibbs

0

2004

£0

Emmanuel Eboué

0

2004

£0

Alex Song

3

2005

£1,000,000

Abou Diaby

7

2006

£2,000,000

Aaron Ramsey

15

2008

£4,500,000

Tomasz Rosicky

23

2006

£6,800,000

Theo Walcott

42

2006

£12,000,000

Carlos Vela

0

2005

£125,000

Nicklas Bendtner

1

2005

£200,000

Eduardo Da Silva

24

2007

£7,500,000

Arsenal Squad

12.6

£92,075,000

Man Utd 2008/09

RTS%

Year Bought

Transfer Fee

Edwin van der Sar

7

2005

£2,000,000

Wes Brown

0

1996

£0

Patrice Evra

19

2006

£5,500,000

Rio Ferdinand

100

2002

£29,100,000

Nemanja Vidic

24

2006

£7,000,000

Michael Carrick

60

2006

£18,600,000

Darren Fletcher

0

2003

£0

Dimitar Berbatov

98

2008

£32,000,000

Carlos Tevez

29

2007

£9,000,000

Cristiano Ronaldo

42

2003

£12,200,000

Wayne Rooney

93

2004

£27,000,000

Man Utd Strongest XI

42.9

£142,400,000

Ji-Sung Park

14

2005

£4,000,000

Gary Neville

0

1991

£0

Ben Foster

3

2005

£1,000,000

John O'Shea

0

1998

£0

Jonny Evans

0

2007

£0

Dong Fangzhuo

2

2004

£500,000

Tomasz Kuszczak

8

2006

£2,500,000

Anderson

58

2007

£18,000,000

Nani

45

2007

£14,000,000

Owen Hargreaves

55

2007

£17,000,000

Ryan Giggs

0

1987

£0

Paul Scholes

0

1993

£0

Rafael Da Silva

10

2008

£3,000,000 est.

Federico Macheda

0

2008

£0

Rodrigo Possebon

10

2008

£3,000,000 est.

Zoran Tasic

33

2008

£10,000,000

Man Utd Squad

26.7

£215,400,000

114

Cost Per Game

While strength in depth —usually at great cost —is important, it can of course be argued, with no little validation, that some teams

had to play a lot of games last season without valuable assets, as unforeseen circumstances ‘robbed’ them of the money spent—for that season at least. Players like Michael Essien, Didier Drogba, Fernando Torres and Owen Hargreaves featured far less than their managers would have liked.

It’s all very well having an expensive squad, but how did the club cope when the manager was unable to call upon a significant amount of the talent contained therein? The overall expenditure is one thing, but what was the cost of the teams that were *selected* over the course of the season? After all, Fernando Torres constitutes a large chunk of Benítez’s spending, and thus his absence wipes off around one sixth of the price of the entire squad, and around one third of the Strongest XI.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, arguably the strongest sides of the big four cost quite a bit less than some of the selections made by the managers. In many cases, mere squad players cost a lot more than some regular starters, although this is actually quite logical in some cases, particularly with someone like Steven Gerrard, who cost nothing as a youth graduate. Other times managers bought two players for one position, and the cheaper one prevailed: one example being how Albert Riera, at £8m, usurped Ryan Babel, who had cost £11.5m. Yossi Benayoun, at £5m, then usurped them both.

The most expensive team fielded during the entire 2008/09 campaign was Manchester United’s in their 4-3 home win against Hull City. Costing a whopping £165.4m, the line-up was as follows: Van der Sar, Neville, Ferdinand, Vidic, Evra, Ronaldo, Carrick, Nani, Anderson, Rooney and Berbatov. Only four players in that side cost less than £12m. This selection cost around £23m more than the value of what is arguably their best XI, with Nani in particular coming to be seen as something of a weak link. Rafa Benítez fielded a side that cost in excess of £100m on

just one occasion, away at Aston Villa: selecting Reina, Arbeloa, Carragher, Škrtel, Dossena, Lucas, Mascherano, Alonso, Kuyt, 115

Torres and Keane (although £23m was wiped off when Torres hobbled off after 25 minutes). By contrast, United fielded a team that cost in excess of £100m on no fewer than 25 occasions, while Chelsea did so a staggering 31 times, although their most expensive selection, fielded on four occasions, worked out at £143.2m, some £22.2m cheaper than United's against Hull. The cost of sides Alex Ferguson put out to face Arsenal, Spurs and Liverpool also topped those picked by any other manager.

Over the course of the season, a team that exceeded £100m in value was fielded on no fewer than 69 occasions: 31 times by Chelsea, 25 times by United, nine times by Spurs, three times by City and just once by Liverpool.

Liverpool's most expensive side —£107.2m —still didn't come *close* to the average of Chelsea's and United's, which were £115.8m and £112.3m respectively. Although United fielded the four most expensive sides seen all season, Chelsea's average was actually slightly higher, since they lacked the home-grown players United called upon on a number of occasions. A total of 50 Starting XIs and two allseason averages rank above that most expensive Liverpool side.

Strictly speaking, United's 'true' average was in fact £109.8m, but this includes the £17m side put out against Hull on the final day of the season; a line-up that would never have appeared had United not just won the league and been faced the Champions League Final a few days later. Credit to them for winning at the KC Stadium, but it adds nothing to the analysis of what it takes to win the title; instead more to the luxuries that can be taken *after* winning it, when the pressure is right down to zero. Ferguson had every right to rest his main men for Rome, with the league sewn up and a massive game to concentrate on, and criticism to the contrary was ludicrous. However, fielding the youth/reserves for

that one Premiership fixture definitely skews the results, and these figures are therefore excluded; especially as the next-cheapest side he selected over the course of the campaign was more than three times as expensive. Clearly it was not representative of United's teams in the slightest, even though it contained several promising players.

Excluding this one aberrant team selection, the cheapest side

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fielded by the top three was Liverpool's at home to Portsmouth, which ran out 1-0 winners with an overall cost of £53.9m. United's cheapest was £57.2m, when winning 1-0 at Stoke. Hull feature in the list again, this time as Chelsea's least expensive side drew 0-0 at home to Phil Brown's men with an XI that cost £82.3m.

Of the 14 most expensive teams fielded in all league fixtures, 12 resulted in wins. The two defeats both came for United, in tricky away games against Liverpool and Arsenal, meaning seven wins from their nine matches, whereas Chelsea won all five when fielding their über-team that cost in excess of £140m.

Perhaps the most surprising of the statistics to emerge is that the cheapest side Spurs fielded was more expensive than the Liverpool *average*, with their own average some £17.5m higher than that of the Reds, at £95.8m. Again, much of this is the result of the mess that comes from changing managers; the bulk of the squad had been signed by Martin Jol, Juande Ramos and Harry Redknapp in just a handful of years, although the latter re-signed players like Robbie Keane and Jermain Defoe, and swooped for Wilson Palacios, all at great expense, without first waiting to recoup money on some of the expensive dead wood in his ranks. Having inherited a team stranded at the foot of the table it's clear that Redknapp did a very good job, although questions have to be asked of the players themselves in failing to perform for Ramos, given the almighty price the squad cost to assemble.

Arsenal's problem seems to be at the other extreme: not enough money spent, rather than too much. There can be no doubting that Arsène Wenger has produced an excellent team in relation to the expenditure, but this appears to have cost them a real tilt at the title in the past year. The average cost of an Arsenal side in 2008/09 was just £41.8m, whilst the most expensive side Wenger sent out cost less than £1m more than Liverpool's cheapest, at £54.4m; almost exactly one-third of United's costliest team selection, and less than half of the averages of both United and Chelsea. Wenger's cheapest XI worked out at £23.7m, and was fielded against Stoke.

The Gunners' fortunes seemed to improve once Andrei Arshavin was added to the team —at £15m, the most expensive
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player at the club. Most of the regulars in the squad had a pointsper-game average of around 1.9 for every match they started; the

Russian's 12 starts saw the team pick up 2.33 points per game, indicating that paying for quality significantly improved the side.

Of course, the 'big four' tend to end the season strongly, so it may have been partly coincidental, but there's no doubt that he added something to Arsenal's attack —not least at Anfield.

Most Expensive Starting XIs During 2008/09

>£100m

#

Team

H/A Opponent For Ag Result

Cost of Starting XI

1

Man Utd

H

Hull

4

3

W

£165,400,000 *

2

Man Utd

A

Arsenal

1

2

L

£155,400,000

3

Man Utd

H

Spurs

5

2

W

£148,400,000

4

Man Utd

A

Liverpool

1

2

L

£148,200,000

5

Chelsea

H

Fulham

3

1

W

£143,200,000 *

6

Chelsea

A

Arsenal

4

1

W

£143,200,000 *

7

Chelsea

H

Blackburn

2

0

W

£143,200,000 *

8

Man Utd

H

Blackburn

2

1

W

£141,900,000

9

Chelsea

H

Man City

1

0

W

£141,550,000

10 Chelsea

A

Sunderland

3

2

W

£141,200,000

11 Man Utd

A

Man City

1

0

W

£138,400,000

12 Man Utd

H

Sunderland

1

0

W

£138,400,000

13 Man Utd

A

Newcastle

2

1

W

£137,400,000

14 Man Utd

A

Blackburn

2

0

W

£132,800,000

15 Man Utd

H

Liverpool

1

4

L

£132,400,000

16 Chelsea

H

Liverpool

0

1

L

£130,650,000

17 Man Utd

H

West Ham

2

0

W

£130,300,000

18 Chelsea

A

Man City

3

1

W

£129,250,000

19 Chelsea

A

Hull

3

0

W

£129,250,000

20 Chelsea

A

Fulham

2

2

D

£127,400,000

21 Chelsea

A

Man Utd

0

3

L

£124,750,000

22 Chelsea

H

Bolton

4

3

W

£124,350,000

23 Chelsea

A

Wigan

1

0

W

£124,150,000

24 Chelsea

H

Spurs

1

1

D

£124,150,000

25 Chelsea

H

Stoke

2

1

W

£122,650,000

26 Man Utd

A

Wigan

2

1

W

£122,300,000

27 Chelsea

H

Man Utd

1

1

D

£121,250,000

28 Chelsea

H

WBA

2

0

W

£120,900,000

29 Chelsea

A

Newcastle

2

0

W

£119,900,000

30 Chelsea

H

Everton

0

0

D

£119,900,000

31 Man Utd

H

WBA

4

0

W

£119,900,000

32 Man Utd

H

Fulham

3

0

W

£119,800,000

33 Man Utd

H

Bolton

2

0

W

£119,800,000

34 Man Utd

A

Everton

1

1

D

£119,800,000

35 Chelsea

H

Newcastle

0

0

D

£119,400,000

36 Chelsea

A

Stoke

2

0

W

£118,800,000

37 Chelsea

A

Portsmouth

1

0

W

£118,800,000

38 Man Utd

A

Chelsea

1

1

D

£116,600,000

39 Chelsea Average

£115,828,158

40 Chelsea

H

Portsmouth

4

0

W

£115,750,000

41 Man Utd

A

Spurs

0

0

D

£114,900,000

118

42 Man Utd

A

Aston Villa

0

0

D

£114,400,000

43 Man Utd

A

WBA

5

0

W

£113,900,000

44 Man Utd

H

Everton

1

0

W

£113,900,000

45 Man Utd

H

Wigan

1

0

W

£113,800,000

46 Chelsea

A

Spurs

0

1

L

£113,700,000

47 Man Utd Average

£112,310,811

48 Man Utd

A

West Ham

1

0

W

£110,900,000

49 Chelsea

A

Aston Villa

1

0

W

£110,500,000

50 Chelsea

H

Aston Villa

2

0

W

£110,400,000

51 Spurs

A

Stoke

1

2

L

£110,200,000 *

52 Chelsea

H

Sunderland

5

0

W

£109,400,000

53 Liverpool

A

Aston Villa

0

0

D

£107,240,000 *

54 Chelsea

H

Arsenal

1

2

L

£106,300,000

55 Man City

A

Arsenal

0

2

L

£104,000,000 *

56 Chelsea

A

WBA

3

0

W

£103,960,000

57 Man Utd

H

Boro

1

0

W

£103,800,000

58 Spurs

A

Arsenal

4

4

D

£103,800,000

59 Spurs

A

Chelsea

1

1

D

£102,900,000

60 Chelsea

H

Boro

2

0

W

£102,800,000

61 Chelsea

A

Liverpool

0

2

L

£102,800,000

62 Spurs

A

Fulham

1

2

L

£102,300,000

63 Chelsea

A

Blackburn

2

0

W

£101,800,000

64 Spurs

H

Boro

4

0

W

£101,700,000

65 Man City

H

Boro

1

0

W

£101,000,000

66 Man Utd

H

Portsmouth

2

0

W

£100,800,000

67 Spurs

A

Boro

1

2

L

£100,800,000

68 Spurs

H

Wigan

0

0

D

£100,800,000

69 Spurs

A

Liverpool

1

3

L

£100,800,000

70 Spurs

A

WBA

0

2

L

£100,700,000

71 Man City

A

Portsmouth

0

2

L

£100,000,000

** Club's most expensive Starting XI during 2008/09.*

Average Cost of Starting XIs During 2008/09

Average Cost of Starting XI

1

Chelsea

£115,828,158

2

Man Utd

£112,310,811

3

Spurs

£95,765,789

4

Liverpool

£78,312,105

5

Man City

£75,057,895

(Man City Jan-May 09)

(£87,270,588)

(Man City Aug 08-Jan-09)

(£65,171,429)

6

Arsenal.

£41,798,684

The above table includes a 'before' and 'after' for Manchester City, whose spending increased notably in the winter transfer window, adding £22m to the average cost of their Starting XI, to take it above Liverpool's. Expect the gap to increase further in 2009/10.

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Part 3

Age of success

Chapter Eleven

The Age of Success

So how old does a team need to be to succeed? Can it be too young, or too old? What is the optimum age?

Statistics about age, as with nearly all the others in this book, prove nothing in themselves. There are always exceptions to any rule that seems to exist. Nonetheless, the statistics do reveal some interesting trends.

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Champions – Strongest XIs

1

Arsenal 2001/02

Average Age

30.0

2 Arsenal 1997/98

Average Age

29.9

3

Man Utd 2000/01

Average Age

29.3

4

Arsenal 2003/04

Average Age

29.0

5

Man Utd 2002/03

Average Age

28.9

6

Man Utd 1999/00

Average Age

28.2

7

Man Utd 1998/99

Average Age

28.0

All Average

Average Age

27.5

8

Man Utd 2002/03

Average Age

27.4

9

Man Utd 2008/09

Average Age

27.3

= Man Utd 2006/07

Average Age

27.3

11 Man Utd 2007/08

Average Age

27.2

12 Man Utd 1996/97

Average Age

27.1

13 Man Utd 1993/94

Average Age

27.0

14 Man Utd 1992/93

Average Age

26.8

(Liverpool 2008/09)

(Average Age)

(26.6)

15 Man Utd 1995/96

Average Age

26.0

= Chelsea 2005/06

Average Age

26.0

17 Chelsea 2004/05

Average Age

25.2

18 Blackburn 1994/95

Average Age

24.9

First-time' winners in bold. (*Brackets: where Liverpool would have ranked*).

Blackburn and Chelsea both won the league for the 'first' time with fairly young sides. Perhaps this is a benefit of quickly-assembled teams that cost a lot of money: players can be bought at the right age —not too young, not too old —rather than waiting for their own talent to develop, which can take a lot longer. Players like Alan Shearer and Arjen Robben were bought at just the right time: early 20s, when they were at their sharpest and fittest.

The average age of all of the Premiership-winning sides works out at 27.5 years. What's fascinating is that, with the exception of 1995/96 ("You win nothing with kids") and 2000/01, Manchester United's Strongest XIs have had an average age of almost exactly that.

No fewer than *eleven* United sides are grouped together either side of that average age. Indeed, their four most recent titlewinning sides average out within just three months of the overall average. Does Alex Ferguson consciously aim to keep his sides

at a set age? If not, it's a big coincidence. Of the three United

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sides listed that failed to win the title, only 1997/98's —which only narrowly lost out —had an average age around this optimum mark; the other two were quite a bit off. Perhaps this is one of the secrets of the Scot's success —although it should go without saying that the mere fact of having a team of optimum average age means nothing if your team is a bunch of Robbie Savages!

While both Blackburn and Chelsea won their first Premiership titles with sides with average ages around the 25-year mark, Arsenal's 2002 vintage, due to having an evergreen back five and Dennis Bergkamp up front, averaged out at a whopping 30. This type of average can be problematic if all the players are in their late 20s and early 30s. Crucially, however, they had younger athletic types, like Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira and Freddie Ljungberg. Also, if you're going to have an older average age, it's usually best divided between experience at the back, a mixture of ages in midfield, and youthful zest up front (this is Arsène Wenger's mantra). There are exceptions, but defenders and goalkeepers tend to mature later and last longer, relying on experience, whereas forwards can 'burn out' more easily, particularly the pacy ones. When Arsenal won their first Premiership title in 1998, with an average that was virtually 30, it was with fast young players like Vieira, Marc Overmars and Nicolas Anelka making a lot of impact.

What's interesting is that Liverpool's average now nestles nicely amongst those of United's successful sides. It's still a fraction off the optimum age, but the same players will be a year older going into the new season, while one or two additions, like 24-year-old Glen Johnson, can help balance the average —still relatively young, but at the same time offering experience.

Champions —Squads

1

Man Utd 2000/2001

Average Age

28.2

2

Arsenal 2001/02

Average Age

27.5

3

Man Utd 1999/2000

Average Age

27.3

4

Man Utd 2007/08

Average Age

27.2

5

Man Utd 1998/99

Average Age

27.2

6

Man Utd 1992/93

Average Age

27.0

7

Man Utd 1993/94

Average Age

27.0

= Arsenal 1997/98

Average Age

26.8

All Average Age

26.5

122

9

Man Utd 2006/07

Average Age

26.4

10 Arsenal 2003/04

Average Age

26.2

11 Blackburn 1994/95

Average Age

26.1

= Man Utd 2007/08

Average Age

26.1

= Man Utd 1995/96

Average Age

26.1

14 Man Utd 2008/09

Average Age

26.0

15 Chelsea 2005/06

Average Age

25.7

16 Man Utd 1996/97

Average Age

25.6

(Liverpool 2008/09)

(Average Age)

(25.4)

17 Chelsea 2004/05

Average Age

24.9

First-time' winners in bold. (*Brackets: where Liverpool would have ranked*).

In terms of squads, the figures are more mixed and less predictable.

This has a lot to do with the number of young fringe players at a number of clubs who, while playing a part, are not regulars. What it does show is that, overall, Liverpool's squad last season was very young; perhaps one of the areas of shortfall in the campaign was having to call upon some players who weren't quite ready, such as David N'Gog —a player who benefited from the experience, and who improved considerably over the course of the season, but who wasn't going to be at his best as he adapted to life in England as a teenager.

With one extra year for the majority of the squad (obviously excluding those who leave), a natural improvement should occur, as players mature and the understanding between the group increases. Of course, the loss of Sami Hyypiä acts as a counterbalance, bringing down the average, and with him goes a great deal of valuable experience. But overall, the precedents set by Manchester United suggest that Liverpool are on the right lines in terms of the age balance.

Time will tell....

Chapter Twelve

When Will Young Buds Blossom?

Every summer, as I approach the conclusion of another book, I reach the point where I come to assess the youngsters. Could this next twelve months be the time for a number of them to shine? Despite cup progress, the youth setup remains an area of some discontent, with the Academy in Kirkby failing to produce even one outstanding talent since its opening in 1999, much to the chagrin of Rafa Benítez, who, as detailed in the opening chapter, made sweeping changes to the structure and personnel at the club. The Reds reached their third FA Youth Cup Final in four seasons, and yet still it's unclear when a significant breakthrough will be made into the first team; so far, only Emiliano Insúa has made any kind of impact since Stephen Warnock's debut in 2004, and even then the Argentine bypassed the youth setup to go straight into the reserve side at 17, upon his recruitment in early 2007 from Boca Juniors. Of course, that suggests he was actually *too good* for the youth side, and that can only be a positive thing to say about an individual. It's clearly better if they are already capable of playing in the reserves or, ideally, the first team itself.

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A similar scenario has played out with Daniel Pacheco (nabbed from Barcelona) and Gerardo Bruna (plucked from Real Madrid), although both need to add physical strength and knowledge of English football, via the reserves, to their undoubted ball skills before they graduate to the first team (if indeed they manage to do so). Icelandic U19 midfielder Victor Palsson, who turned 18 in April 2009, three months after his arrival from Danish club AGF Aarhus, was another player who was eligible for the youth team but who moved straight into the reserves, as did Dutch winger

Vincent Weijl, also 18.

So the FA Youth Cup is not a true indication of the talent at the club within that age bracket. While Arsenal chose to omit Aaron Ramsey from their side, they did include Jack Wilshire, the gifted 17-year-old who made eight appearances for the Gunners' first team, including one in the Premiership. Liverpool stuck with the same squad of players, refusing to utilise players who were gaining experience at higher levels. Had they done so they may well have won the trophy, but it would only have made a difference to *perceptions* of the quality of the club's youngsters. If anything, playing established reserves might actually have stymied those younger players who still needed to be in kindergarten, compared with those developing at primary school, in preparation for graduation to the seniors.

Part of the 'problem' with the Reds' two previous Youth Cups, in 2006 and 2007, is that there appeared to be a great team spirit, excellent organisation but vitally, only good —and not great —players. Lots of those involved in the winning of those trophies have futures at league level —and that's pretty good going —but few seem destined for the very top.

Paul Anderson and Jack Hobbs, both brought in from other clubs, remain talented, and clearly have futures in the game at a fairly high level, perhaps even the Premiership at some stage, but there's a big leap from there to a first team that is now amongst the best in the world. At 16, Swedish playmaker Astrit Ajdarevic looked incredibly promising in 2007's success, but he had lost his way a little by the time he turned 18, and ended up on loan at Leicester City with a view to a permanent move —something

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Hobbs sealed after a successful season at the Walkers Stadium.

Martin Hansen, 19, remains a fine young goalkeeper, but he's still just that: a young goalkeeper, in a long line of budding custodians.

Charlie Barnett has found himself at Tranmere, after his release

from Liverpool seemed to leave him out of the game. Godwin Antwi has done well on loan at various clubs, but all at lower league level, and was one of the Youth Cup victors from 2006 released three years later, along with Miki Roque.

Former Ross County starlet Gary MacKay-Steven and Paraguayan centre-half Ronald Huth were fairly recent acquisitions who were also let go. A lot had also been expected of Marvin Pourie, but the striker was transferred to Schalke 04 around the time of his 18th birthday in January 2009, and loaned to 2nd division club Munich 1860, for whom he made a handful of starts before a transfer to Schalke 04.

To date, Craig Lindfield has gone out on loan to four different clubs, but at the age of 20 has still not gained experience beyond League Two level. Not every young striker can break through at 16/17/18, like Wayne Rooney, Michael Owen and Robbie Fowler respectively, and loan experience is often vital in a player's development—but to make it at the top you need to be doing a little bit more at that age. Lindfield appears the epitome of the recent local youth graduates: solid, honest, hardworking, but unspectacular. Left-back Robbie Threlfall is another, having spent loan periods at Hereford and Stockport County. Professional careers seem like certainties for most of these lads, but more likely replicating the careers of Paul Jewell and John Durnin, who left Liverpool to spend many happy years in the lower divisions, rather than Gerrard, Fowler, Owen and Carragher.

Adam Hammill, now 21, has continued to find himself farmed out, with mixed loan spells at Dunfermline, Southampton, Blackpool and Barnsley—although only his sojourn to the south coast was a disappointment. Approaching almost 100 games in senior football, the tricky winger is at the make-or-break stage regarding his Liverpool future. A Scouser and a fan, he'd clearly love to stay at Anfield, but time is running out.

Happily though, appearing to buck the trend are two local lads.

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First, Jay Spearing, the diminutive midfield harrier whose game, like Sammy Lee before him, also involves good passing ability. Spearing's 20-minute cameo against Real Madrid was one of the highlights of the season, with the fans keen to support one of their own (although at times that support was lacking for his rival for the back-up role, Lucas Leiva, perhaps because he was seen to be blocking the path of a local lad). In the way all conspiracy theories exist because of a lack of evidence, youngsters are never better than when they've yet to feature, or have had just one brilliant cameo; of course, it then takes only one bad game for them to be completely written off.

Does it suggest a gulf in talent that at the same age, Lucas was Brazilian Footballer of the Year and a full international for the most magical and mythical team in world football, while Spearing can only boast half an hour of senior action? Certainly Lucas wasn't looking like such a special player in the red of Liverpool. However, his pedigree suggested Benítez was right to have faith in him; faith that was largely repaid as the ex-Gremio midfielder's form improved dramatically in the second half of the season, if not to stellar proportions.

Spearing would have to go some way to play as well as Lucas did at Old Trafford, but at two years the Brazilian's junior, he has time to prove his worth —although of course, he'll also need the chance. Certainly Spearing offers something special in terms of his commitment, and will get into the Champions League squads due to his nationality. His lack of height may work against him, though —certainly it's hard to see him ever being paired with Javier Mascherano (although at the time of writing, Barcelona are trying to lure the Argentine away, so it may never be an issue).

With English football, despite its advances, still particularly

reliant on set-pieces —especially in the case of less-glamorous teams looking to get one over on major clubs —it becomes more risky to select anyone of below average height.

Martin Kelly is more of a surprise package, to most fans at least, and he's certainly not 'vertically challenged'. Having missed two years of football with a serious back problem during his development, he has emerged as one of the most promising

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English defenders around. Now 19, the 6' 3" centre-back, who can also play at full-back, made his senior debut as a late substitute in a Champions League clash with PSV in December 2008. This was followed by a loan spell at League One side Huddersfield Town in the spring of 2009. He made his debut for the Terriers at left-back in the 2–1 win over Bristol Rovers on 31st March —and received praise for his composed performance, which featured bursting runs upfield with the pace and skill not usually associated with the proverbial 'big man'. On April 18th he scored his first goal in professional football, grabbing the winner in Huddersfield's 3–2 win over Walsall at the Bescot Stadium. With the departure of Sami Hyypiä, Kelly and Mikel San José have a chance of promotion to 4th-choice centre-back.

Stephen Darby, another local, also has a chance of making the grade, but perhaps has less scope for a place in the side on a longterm basis, with Kelly's extra height and pace making him more suitable to fill in in any of the defensive positions, and Glen Johnson, himself only 24, the perfect right-back —in theory, at least. Darby, like Spearing, was rewarded with new three-year contract in July 2009.

One young player who definitely appears to have what it takes is Krisztián Németh, another mainstay of the reserve side —although the Hungarian, who has an abundance of natural ability, saw his season effectively written off just as a place in the senior squad beckoned. Having missed the first half of the campaign with

an injury, he went to Blackpool on a month's loan in the spring to help regain his match fitness, only to suffer a broken cheekbone just minutes into his debut. He will surely contest a place on the bench with fellow 20-year-old striker, David N'gog, who is three months his junior.

A young import who simply needs a change in fortune is Francisco Duran, signed from Malaga in January 2007. The attacking midfielder, who was the subject of interest from Arsenal at the time, already had four first team appearances under his belt before moving to Merseyside in January 2007, but has barely kicked a ball at any level since. Twice he ruptured the cruciate ligaments in his right knee, and at the start of 2009 suffered the same injury

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once more, this time to his left knee. Now 21, he remains a special talent, if he can put his misfortune behind him. "Mentally, the boy is as strong a kid as you will ever meet in terms of what he's been through," said Gary Ablett at the time of the latest setback, "and we are all doing our best to keep the lad going. Fran is probably as technically a gifted a player as we have in the reserve team squad and it's just unfortunate he's had these injuries."

Equally unfortunate was Nikola Sarić, the Sarajevo-born Danish striker snapped up at the age of 17 in 2008, as the Reds fought off stiff competition from Barcelona for the prodigy's signature. Like Duran, Sarić is extremely gifted technically, but only made his debut for the reserves at the very end of the campaign due to a serious knee injury. The reserves will be far better with this pair available and pushing for places in the first team squad.

It also has to be hoped that Damien Plessis, now 21, will rediscover the form that saw him force his way into Benítez's plans —although it seemed somewhat inevitable that he'd suffer in the limbo brought about by being too good to play in the lessinspiring environs of the reserves (having already enjoyed some big occasions for the senior side), but facing three world-class

players and a Brazilian international ahead of him in the pecking order for the first team. Plessis is a very good player, but 2009/10 could be make-or-break for the tall French midfielder.

Finally, Hungarian Péter Gulácsi, 19, has a good chance of being promoted to the Reds' reserve keeper at some stage soon. Gulácsi, signed from MTK, made 18 loan appearances for Hereford United in the latter stages of last season, but despite his own outstanding form couldn't stop them dropping out of the Football League.

2009 Onwards

Despite losing the 2009 Youth Cup Final 6-2 on aggregate to an older, more experienced Arsenal side (with players boasting first-team league experience at their own club, and also out on loan), there could actually be more promise in this Liverpool vintage (although almost exclusively in the form of talent sourced beyond Merseyside) than in the two that recently landed the trophy. Whereas Liverpool beat Manchester City in 2006, it is

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the Eastlands side who have seen a number of their setup play significant roles for the first team. While winning trophies is a beneficial experience for teenagers, Liverpool will reap more from having one or two outstanding kids than a strong collective.

The obvious candidate for future first team success is Finnish striker, Lauri Dalla Valle. A natural goalscorer, he has good technique and clever movement, and also possesses a decent turn of pace, without being electric. Not the tallest (5' 11", but with time to still grow), he has good strength, and shields the ball particularly well —also due to an advanced awareness of how to position his body to keep a defender at bay, which is reminiscent of Kenny Dalglish's ability to back into centre-backs —to stop them from stealing the ball, or to be touch-tight in order to 'roll' them more easily.

The Finn, who turns 18 in September 2009, scored eight goals in eight games in the Youth Cup run, and 23 in 32 games in total

for the U18s. Having been on the books at Inter Milan until the summer of 2007, he quit due to homesickness, even though his father is Italian. That sparked a battle for his signature, with Chelsea seriously courting him, but he chose Liverpool, with its strong Finnish connections in Sami Hyypiä and Jari Litmanen, despite there being less money on offer. He is contracted to the Reds until 2011, but that's very likely to be extended, given his progress. "I don't like to talk too much about just one player when the team is doing well," Benítez said on the eve of the Youth Cup Final, "but clearly he is a striker that has scored a lot of goals. He has a future here."

German left-back Christopher Buchtman, scouted from Borussia Dortmund at the start of 2008, is another hugely promising player. Buchtman was singled out by UEFA as one of their ten top tips for the future following the 2009 U17 European Championships, in which he shone on home soil. The blonde-haired defender turned 17 during the competition, and had therefore spent most of the season impressing in Liverpool's U18 side when two years 'underage'.

Swedish left-winger Alex Kacaniklic, who turns 18 this August, also has a lot of promise. His problem could be one of physique: he has the blistering turn of pace, but appears lightweight. Of course,

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much can change in a young player's development in his late teens, and work with weights will be undertaken. If they're quick enough and good enough, wispy wingers can still thrive in the modern game, as seen with Marc Overmars and Arjen Robben. Kacaniklic scored excellent goals in both the semi-final, against Birmingham, and the final, when an instinctive volley with his 'wrong' foot was despatched with aplomb into the top corner.

David Amoo, a junior sprint champion, was brought in from Millwall in the summer of 2007, and unlike Kacaniklic, the Londoner appears far more capable of looking after himself on

the right flank. Having turned 18 at the end of the 2008/09 season, his next steps had to be promotion to Melwood —which was achieved, with Dalla Valle, Buchtman, Kacaniklic and Nathan Eccleston joining him —and then making a name for himself in the reserves; something his physique suggests he capable of doing. He's not just a speedster: Amoo has surprising grace and close control, and some end product to his exciting approach play. What he currently lacks is the aggression and arrogance that can help skilful players thrive: John Barnes was also mild-mannered, but 'nice guys' can get kicked out of games. That said, Amoo looks like he has all the physical attributes: pace, strength (which will also improve with age and training) and, at roughly 6', height. Of a similar build is 16-year-old Andre Wisdom, who was just 15 until the latter stages of the season. Scouted from Bradford City in January 2008 for an undisclosed fee, Wisdom could be the real gem in the pack. Although he has good (if not faultless) technique, he also appears physically capable of slotting into senior football —something that hasn't been true of a lot of Liverpool's Academy graduates, particularly the local lads.

Wisdom's midfield partner in the Youth Cup semi-final was Adam Pepper, a talented youngster who'd been making waves on Merseyside for a few years, but who still looks like a boy. It's important that technical players get their chance, because some will enjoy growth spurts as they move through their teens —and as Spain showed in 2008, small, skilful players can beat the new athletic breed. The problem, of course, is finding players of the quality of Xavi, Silva, Villa and Iniesta; even more natural talent

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is needed to compensate for a lack of physical gifts, whether in stature or speed. Arsenal have collected some diminutive players of late, albeit in a team still replete with African athleticism.

Wisdom, however, appears more in the mould of Micah Richards,

who impressed against Liverpool in the 2006 Youth Cup, by which time, at the age of 17, he had already played a number of games in City's first team. Richards' stellar rise has been checked somewhat of late; questions have been raised about his temperament, having achieved success at a young age and metaphorically taken his eye off the ball (something also literally true of his recent defending). But there is also the notion that he got further quicker because of his great physical maturity; and that, with no scope to develop in that sense—in contrast to a lot of younger players in their late teens, when they 'bulk up'—his progress appeared to stall. Having initially excelled against far older men, it suggests the ability was definitely there—he wasn't just bullying weaker boys—but with Wisdom still in youth football, and therefore often playing against some paperweight opponents, it's too early to draw similar conclusions.

The youngster was excellent in central midfield in the semifinals against Birmingham, as he had been in earlier rounds when

deployed in the back four, but he was unable to impose himself in the final, perhaps due to Arsenal's overall superiority. Having said that, Wisdom did grow into the game in the second half of the second leg, but by that time the cup had been all but lost. Jay Emmanuel-Thomas, who turns 19 in 2009, was even bigger and stronger in the opposing midfield, but he has three years on the Liverpool starlet.

Australian Dean Bouzanis, who turns 19 in October, proved his worth in the run to the final, although was given little chance with some of Arsenal's finishing over the two legs. The Aussie looks and plays like a junior version of Pepé Reina, with whom he trains: similar height, build and style, and very quick to distribute the ball.

But he might have a long wait to dethrone the Spaniard.

Loan spells at other clubs will benefit a number of these players. It's hard for any young talent to prove himself at Liverpool if he hasn't had the chance to show his worth in first team football

elsewhere; Benítez doesn't have the luxury of bleeding them when every league game is must-win, while a League Cup run can be over in a game or two. Most loans have merely served to show that the youngster was good, just *not good enough*.

These loan deals end up seeming like sentences of doom to some onlookers, because the players rarely return to play a part. However, these days it's a vital learning curve for all but the most prodigiously gifted (Rooney, Gerrard, Owen). The majority of the current England setup went out on loan before making an impact at their own clubs. New Liverpool right-back Glen Johnson went to Millwall before his West Ham breakthrough, Frank Lampard went to Swansea, John Terry to Nottingham Forest, Ashley Cole to Crystal Palace, David Beckham to Preston, David Bentley to Norwich, and both Rio Ferdinand and Jermain Defoe went to Bournemouth. Those who didn't go out on loan, such as David James, Joleon Lescott, Ashley Young, Phil Jagielka, Shaun Wright-Phillips and Theo Walcott were at clubs in a lower division to start with. Indeed, Chelsea's Michael Mancienne even made the England squad while on loan at Wolves.

With the Liverpool connection strengthening at Tranmere —the reserves will play their games at Prenton Park, now the Wirral club is managed by John Barnes and Jason McAteer —it seems that loans between the two clubs will be inevitable. Indeed, it could be argued that Tranmere will act as an unofficial feeder club —less in the sense of players heading to Anfield, but rather as a finishing school for the Liverpool lads, who can come back to the fold as better players. Barnes and McAteer will get good quality youngsters for a period of time —a month, three months, a full season —without having to pay transfer fees (and maybe not even wages), making the arrangement mutually beneficial. It will enable the Liverpool coaching staff to easily keep tabs on the loanees, and may help put numbers onto the Tranmere gate, particularly as

they often play on Friday nights to avoid clashes with the two city giants. The lads themselves won't have to move out of the area, so it helps with their overall attachment to the Reds and to life on Merseyside. In theory, it sounds ideal.

“Rafa Benítez has already said he would love to help us out,”

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said McAteer in June 2009. “My agent has spoken to him at length about things as Liverpool wanted to know what was going on. Rafa was really complimentary and when you've got that kind of support you've got a chance.”

Newcomers

The summer of 2009 had barely begun before recruits were added to the youth ranks, in what is of necessity a continual turnover of players: the best kept, the worst released. Jesus Fernandez Saez —nicknamed Suso— arrived from Cadiz, where he was regarded as an incredibly bright prospect; so much so, Real Madrid and Barcelona were also sniffing around, although they are linked with so many different players as a matter of course. The creative midfielder was 16 at the time he signed from the *Segunda División* outfit. His former coach Quique Gonzalez told *Goal.com* that Suso is “a leftsided midfielder with extraordinary talent. He has great quality, a good shot, his vision is great and his passing is outstanding. He has a bit of everything and I think Liverpool have signed a jewel. With a youth team one can try them out in several positions, but I think he would also be good as an attacking or holding midfielder. He may not have that much speed, that is not his strong point. But he can dribble well and does have great vision. He could be effective playing in the middle.”

Another 16-year-old, Aaron King, was signed from Rushden & Diamonds. King made a positive impression during a trial with the Reds, and put his name to a two-year scholarship deal.

At the time of writing, Liverpool are on the verge of signing two more up-and-coming players, both of whom are expected to

agree three-year deals. The Reds are hoping to secure the signature of Nikolaj Kohlert, a 16-year-old forward who plays for Esbjerg, according to reports in his native Denmark, after the Under 17 international impressed greatly during a trial at Melwood. And France Under 18 international Chris Mavinga, who can play at leftback or at the heart of the defence, will choose Liverpool over Arsenal; reuniting him with compatriot David N’Gog, who had swapped Paris Saint-Germain for Anfield a year earlier.

As Liverpool continue to scout for promising young talent to

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bolster the ranks of locals already in the system, more players will continue to arrive; clubs cannot stand still in this regard, with the next big thing always out there somewhere —it’s just a question of finding, and getting to him first. But as ever, the vast majority of young players developed or signed will not make the grade.

European Rules

From last season, UEFA rules dictated that eight (increased from six) players in the 25-man Champions League squads must be ‘from’ the home country, with at least four of those developed by any participating club’s own academy, and the other four places comprised of players from any academy in the country.

Liverpool can only boast Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher as Academy graduates in their first-team ranks. Nationally-trained purchases Jermaine Pennant and Robbie Keane both left the club in 2009, leaving just two players who are good enough and fit the criteria. A club-developed player is defined as someone who is “trained for over three years by a club from the relevant national association between the ages of 15 and 21” —so nationality is irrelevant. Emiliano Insúa will presumably just miss the cut on qualification —for 2009/10, at least, although he will reach the three-year point at the club the same month he turns 21. Others, like Pacheco, will qualify in due course, providing they develop as hoped.

Rafa Benítez gave this as the reason why he agreed to pay a premium for Glen Johnson, who came through the ranks at West Ham. “We were looking for a player of quality and also somebody who is British because of the new Champions League rules. Glen Johnson fits both categories.”

With this rule in mind, certain players might not be sent on the season-long loans that could benefit their development, because they are needed to fill the quota of home-grown English talent. But that means that if they do get called upon, even if only in an emergency, they may get the chance to stake a strong claim in the immediate moment.

Part Four

Performance:

2008/09

Chapter Thirteen

Hamstrung

Consider these facts regarding how often Rafa Benítez was able to field his strongest side in 2008/09.

To start with, his two key players, Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard, started only 14 league matches in tandem —just 37% of the season. And yet in those fixtures the Reds racked up a points-per-game ratio in keeping with a 97-point final total: a whopping 2.57 each time they were in the starting XI. Liverpool won matches in their absence, including an impressive victory at home to Manchester United, as part of a respectable 2.08 points-per-game over 24 fixtures, but any team will clearly be weakened without its best players.

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Also crucial to Benítez's best side were Pepé Reina and Jamie Carragher; with more luck regarding this pair, the manager was able to send them out to start all 38 matches. Adding these to the equation therefore changes nothing: the injuries to Gerrard and Torres still meant that no more than 14 of the 38 matches were with anything like approaching Liverpool's best side.

Before going any further, let's once again clarify the notion of a strongest XI in this day and age. While a lot of big clubs don't have an obvious strongest line-up, they all have five, six, maybe even seven or eight vital players who would be selected for any major match. Debate will always exist over the strongest possible teams that can be constructed from a squad, but those covered in this section are the shoo-ins.

Many felt Xabi Alonso to be the Reds' star performer of the campaign, while the poll undertaken for this book placed him narrowly behind Gerrard, in 2nd place. Despite some differences

with Rafa Benítez towards the end of 2007/08, and an apparent disposability at the time (due to his performances being less impressive than when he first arrived, and Gareth Barry being sought), the Spanish midfield maestro emerged as one of the Premiership's best players. Apart from the first game, against Sunderland (when he came on as a substitute and turned the match in 30 minutes), when he was fit, Alonso almost always played. But due to several overzealous or downright outrageous tackles —six opposition players were sent off for fouls on him —he collected a few knocks along the way. These limited him to 27 league starts, which in turn meant that the trio of Torres, Gerrard and Alonso (plus Carragher and Reina) started just nine Premiership games together —less than a quarter of the campaign.

Therefore, having named just five key players Benítez would have desperately wanted the option of selecting every week (even if he actually chose to rest one or two of them now and again), the tally is already more than 75% of league games without the possibility of picking his best side.

Liverpool won seven and drew two of the nine games in which the aforementioned quintet started, although one of those draws (Everton at Anfield) was Torres' first league start in a couple of months —and it showed, as he hit the post with an early chance

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when through on goal —while the draw at home to Stoke was different from some of the other stalemates (Fulham and West Ham spring to mind) in that Liverpool had a perfectly good goal chalked off, and thoroughly deserved the win.

Pro rata, the nine games this quintet started, as with the figures for just Gerrard and Torres in tandem, equates to 97 points for the season, 11 more than the team's actual final tally and seven more than Manchester United's total. Of course, if all five had played each and every game, there's nothing to say that tiredness wouldn't

have adversely affected one or two results —even had they been fit, some rotation would have been essential —but it's food for thought all the same.

The next name on the list is arguably that of Javier Mascherano, although Dirk Kuyt was a growing influence on the team, and, due to his incredible fitness levels, able to start 36 of the league games without ever looking tired.

But we'll start with the Argentine —a key part of the team's spine. The Olympics took 'Masch' to Beijing at the start of the season, meaning he started only two of the first six league fixtures. Other absences —most notably after time spent jetting around the world for those gruelling World Cup qualifiers —meant that of the nine games the aforementioned key quintet started, Mascherano was able to start just four.

So, arguably Rafa's six most important players (in fairness, it's essentially seven players, as Kuyt also featured in them all) were selected to start together just *four* times in the Premiership.

The games in question?

Man City away, Chelsea at home, Aston Villa at home and Spurs at home. On paper, four tough games. In actuality, four wins, with 13 goals scored, and only three conceded.

Beyond these seven players, it gets harder to say who would be in Liverpool's best side. Of course, there were serious disruptions at centre-back, with Agger starting the season still recovering from the previous campaign's injury woes, and just as he was coming back to full sharpness, Škrtel went over on his knee at Eastlands and missed a few months of football. Agger took his place, then picked up another niggling injury, before ending the season strongly as the manager alternated between the two. Both clearly have equally

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strong cases to partner Jamie Carragher, with Škrtel perhaps more suited to the tougher away games where top-quality forwards need

nullifying, and Agger better at striding into midfield to unlock packed defences at Anfield. Either way, it's not really possible say at this point which one would be in the strongest XI. Both are top centre-backs.

On the left flank also, there were also no nailed-on certs; Albert Riera was the clear first choice for the first half of the season, but Yossi Benayoun's form from February onwards made him (along with Kuyt) a virtual shoo-in in at least in at least one of the midfield positions, especially as Riera seemed to run out of steam by the spring. Andrea Dossena started the season as the first-choice left-back without impressing, before Fabio Aurélio came in and had his best spell in a Liverpool shirt; meanwhile Emiliano Insúa impressed in his nine league starts, suggesting that he might yet make the spot his own in the near future, especially with Aurélio's persistent injury problems.

With Philipp Degen's season a virtual write-off due to a catalogue of injuries, and Steve Finnan departed for Spain, Alvaro Arbeloa became the clear first-choice right-back. Arbeloa may not be of the standard of the other shoo-ins, many of whom are world-class talents —and he looks to have been replaced by Glen Johnson for 2009/10 —but he was the one and only fit right-back, and someone who had a very good season overall. As such, he was clearly in Benítez's strongest team.

Of course, there will have been occasions when key players were rested, meaning that it wasn't always ill-fortune that robbed Rafa of his best men. But it was a case of needs-must when, for instance, Alonso was omitted at St James' Park because of the festive schedule; he came on as a sub, to score a penalty in a 5-1 thumping, but even in his absence the score could have been 10-0 at half-time. With four games in ten days, fresh legs were essential. But the manager's best team wasn't available to him that day anyway, with Torres out injured.

Then there's the issue of Robbie Keane, who might have expected to be a first-choice player —and one who seemed to start the season as an automatic pick. However, it's fairly clear that Benítez wouldn't have also started with Torres, Gerrard,

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Alonso and Mascherano in the same side, with the captain almost certain to drop into a standard central midfield role when Keane partnered Torres, and either Alonso or Mascherano shunted to the bench. But the way things panned out, with the Argentine at the Olympics, and injuries to Torres and Gerrard, Keane was in the team most games anyway.

So a 'best Liverpool team' during 2008/09 can only be said to definitely include eight players: Reina, Carragher, Alonso, Mascherano, Gerrard, Kuyt and Torres —the seven vital cogs in the red machine (or the 'key core').

Other players were important at different stages of the season, but they were the main men. *And they started just four league games together.*

United Comparison

So how different was it for title-winner Alex Ferguson at United? If anything, his Strongest XI is even harder to define. Much of his success was put down to the strength of his squad, and it's easy to see why, with the Champions League Final against Barcelona contested with Dimitar Berbatov, who cost £32m, sat on the bench alongside Carlos Tevez, whose total transfer fee, if the balance had been paid, would have reached £34m. (Then again, Ferguson might have done better to pick one of them against Barcelona, given the performance of his team.)

Berbatov started 29 Premiership matches, but his exclusion from games against Liverpool at Old Trafford and Barcelona in Rome suggests he was not, like Torres and Gerrard at Liverpool, a clear 'best XI' player, but rather a very strong and favoured *tactical*

option. It's unthinkable that Liverpool would have willingly gone into such games without either of their key pair, if they were fit; or, indeed, without Carragher, Reina, Mascherano and, on his form of 2008/09, Alonso. And while Berbatov seemed like Ferguson's preferred choice, Tevez, like Benayoun with Riera, rose above him in the pecking order for the last two months of the season, starting more league games and coming on first in the humbling at the hands (or feet) of Barça.

United's key core last season is therefore fairly clear: Edwin van der Sar, Rio Ferdinand, Nemanja Vidic, Cristiano Ronaldo
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and Wayne Rooney. Alex Ferguson clearly wanted these men fit whenever possible, and they were obvious starters for the main games —no ifs or buts.

Other areas, such as central midfield, are less clear, with Darren Fletcher, Michael Carrick, Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes and Anderson all starting important games in the position at various stages of the campaign, as Owen Hargreaves missed the entire season bar one match. With right-back also a position that was shared by various players —Gary Neville was no longer fit enough or young enough to have the berth to himself —it left Patrice Evra as the only remaining shoo-in when fit (and the natural choice at leftback), with the Frenchman's overlapping vital to the way United play. (Incidentally, the figures are the same whether or not Evra is included, as he began every game in which the other five started.) These six players began twelve Premiership games together, or roughly just under one third of the season. As with Liverpool, the majority of these players —the key core —form the spine of the side, and that obviously makes sense. In the case of Ronaldo, he was sometimes deployed in central areas, but wherever he started, he was clearly part of the 'spine', given that he had an essentially free role.

Anyway, it's interesting to note that of these twelve games,

United won ‘only’ eight, drawing two and losing two. This averages out at 2.17 points per game, or 82 over the course of the season. These figures aren’t skewed by being especially difficult fixtures: only two were against ‘big four’ sides —one-third of the total played each season against Liverpool, Chelsea and Arsenal —from roughly one-third of the 38 matches. So it’s par for the course in that respect.

While none of this ‘proves’ anything, it does suggest that it was indeed United’s strength in depth which won the day, as many suspected.

But it also suggests that Liverpool’s strongest side could have actually been *better* than United’s, and not just fairly equal to it, as a lot of neutrals in the media felt. Such a theory will always be controversial —and despite what some fans claimed, you certainly can’t put a lot of stock in the head-to-head matches as definitive proof of superiority. (After all, that would have meant Stoke were

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the equals of Liverpool.)

However, the way Liverpool performed in those two games —especially when compared with recent head-to-heads against United —hints that there could definitely be something behind the theory. It’s not really possible to say that Liverpool’s strongest team was *definitely* better than United’s, but it’s no longer the case that Liverpool fans look on with envy at the talent at Old Trafford —something that has been the case for much of the Premiership era.

While Ferguson had more strength in depth, he actually *needed* to use it less than Benítez. The Scot was able to name his ‘key core’ three times as often —twelve to four —as his Spanish counterpart.

While Ferguson had less impressive results than Benítez upon fielding his key core, the one player who did make a big difference was Ronaldo. The 31 games he started resulted in an average that would have seen United win 93 points across 38 fixtures, three more

than they actually racked up. In the seven games he missed, United picked up just 14 points, at an average of two per game, or 76 for the season —not bad, but not title-winning form. That's taking just one single player out of the equation.

If Ronaldo had missed the same amount of football as Torres, the story might have been very different. In theory at least, based on the results gained without him, United would have ended up with 81 points had the Portuguese started just 20 games (the same as the Spaniard) —a dip of some nine points, handing the title to Liverpool by a margin of five.

Going further, had Torres started 31 games (Ronaldo's total) and Ronaldo only 20 (Torres' total), the swing is even greater, albeit fractionally. Liverpool would have added one extra point to their overall tally, making a total of 87, thus leaving a six-point winning margin.

Of course, this is just Torres' absence on his own; the biggest blow was how often his partnership with Gerrard was unavailable to Benítez. As stated at the start of this chapter, they were worth the equivalent of 97 points across a full season when in tandem, but they only started 14 games together. At times, both were absent. By contrast, at least one of either Rooney or Ronaldo —United's equivalent pairing —was selected for every single league game bar 142

one, with the only fixture they both missed the dead rubber at Hull on the final day of the season, when the title was already wrapped up.

When they started together —21 times —United won points at a rate of 2.43 per game, which is the equivalent of 92 over 38 games. Clearly they were vital to United, and Ferguson could pair them together 50% more in league matches than Benítez could his own top two. When one of Ferguson's pair was missing, United's point rate dropped to 2.33, although, of course, they were never

tested without both.

It's also only fair to credit any manager for buying a player who is not prone to injuries, although in the case of Ronaldo, little could have been known about his durability at the age of 17 —at the same age, Michael Owen had faultless hamstrings, after all. Maybe that makes Ferguson's gamble to pay £12.2m all the more impressive, although it wouldn't have looked so clever had Ronaldo indeed been susceptible to repetitive muscle strains. (Although what this says about Ferguson now signing Owen remains to be seen.)

For Liverpool, it's all a case of 'what might have been' (for the season, as well as perhaps signing the Portuguese winger, who nearly arrived in 2003 for £4m). But perhaps rather than outwitting Benítez in winning the title, Ferguson was just luckier on this occasion. How the United manager copes without both Ronaldo and Tevez will be interesting to monitor, although the £80m they received in transfer fees will help them find some replacements with heady reputations. How quickly —if at all —these recruits gel will be critical; but it's hard to see anyone slip as seamlessly into the side as the two they've lost.

Chapter Fourteen

Goal Involvement

When turning football into numbers, there will always be problems. And when it comes to ‘assists’, this is especially true. How can you reward someone who rolls the ball eight inches from an indirect free-kick as highly as someone who beats seven men and puts the ball in the striker’s path in the six-yard box?

Goal Involvement, devised for this book, is a subjective system, which tries to move away from the hard binary of assist figures by taking into account the *quality* of the contribution in the build-up to a goal, not just rewarding the player who made the final ‘pass’. So not only are the number of goals a player is involved in counted, there is a separate tally for the quality of his contribution.

Perhaps the same can be done with goals, but even the simplest tap-in requires the act of getting into the right space at the right time. As the aim of the game is to get the ball beyond that white line then that’s perhaps taking things too far. Goals are goals (although the next chapter does look at the importance of when goals are scored within a match, and the quality of opposition scored against; let’s face it, a goal against Manchester United is rarely worth the same as one against a mid-table side. So in that sense, their value does differ.)

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But goalscorers are already richly rewarded in terms of kudos; their achievements are well-known, whereas those who create the chances often get less acclaim for their actions —particularly those who aren’t flashy in what they do. Many significant contributions don’t even get listed as assists.

Standard assists work back no further than the penultimate player to touch the ball. But goals are created far before that point.

However, a sensible cut-off is required; if a defender performs a miracle in his own box 37 passes before a goal is scored at the other end, he has clearly played a role in that goal—but too much has happened in between to be able to class his participation as an assist. A line must be drawn somewhere. If he plays a 60-yard pass that within two or three touches has led to a goal, then that will be considered.

Dummies, clever blocking of an opponent off the ball, winning possession, running to create space, even a good pass that nicks off an opponent before rebounding to a team-mate: contrary to standard assists, all of these are considered as part of Goal Involvement, providing the contribution is of some importance. It may not get a high score in terms of the quality of contribution, but it will go down as another goal in which that player was involved.

Of course, creative players only get their reward if the striker does his job properly. A winger could put in ten brilliant crosses and the striker miss them all, only for someone else to put in an average cross from which he scores. So—as with all statistics—this measure needs to be taken in context, and its shortcomings

appreciated. Emiliano Insúa didn't feature in a single Liverpool goal, but his fine attacking play from left-back was clear to see.

To judge the quality of involvement, I developed the following guide:

1 = The most basic touch, such as an inadvertent ricochet or rolling the ball from an indirect free-kick.

2 = More involved than 1, but basic all the same. Could be simply keeping a move ticking over, without making the final pass.

3 = Significant involvement, but fairly standard. Nothing remarkable, but some skill, fine technique or vision required.

4 = The same as 3, but where something special marks the touch

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out. Might be more than one involvement in the move, or the use of the

player's weaker foot to surprising effect. Could be a good pass with the same player having already won the ball, or a good pass that is elevated by inch-perfect weighting.

5 = World-class, genius, inspired. Often means more than one involvement, or a moment of unexpected vision. Basically, a magnificent contribution to a goal being scored. (Example: Daniel Agger's dribble upfield for the equaliser against Wigan at Anfield, where he then played a one-two, beat a man, and delivered a 'wrong'-foot pass to Kuyt that was inch-perfect for him to score.)

Results

These figures were applied to both Primary (the final pass) and Secondary Assists (the build-up to the goal) for each player, which were combined, along with the goals he himself scored, for an overall Goal Involvement tally. The Quality of the assists can be seen as an average, to get an idea of who was doing that little bit extra in creating goals, and who was merely making a few simple touches here and there.

Dirk Kuyt made a particularly heavy cutting-edge contribution, with more Primary than Secondary assists, and also 15 goals of his own. In the official assist statistics, he ranked 6th out of the whole Premiership. While he also scores highly here, the true worth of a player like Xabi Alonso is brought to the fore with this system, due to his very high number of Secondary Assists —something that gets missed in traditional assist analysis. Javier Mascherano is another whose Secondary involvement was high —he often won the ball in a dangerous area for Liverpool, and within a couple of passes a goal had been scored; he just rarely made the killer pass. In 2008/09 Liverpool scored 99 goals in the Premiership and Champions League combined. For the purposes of this book, these were the only goals examined. The unexpected bonus of this figure is that the number of goals a player was involved in is therefore more-or-less the same as the *percentage* of Liverpool goals. Therefore,

with a tally of 45, Steven Gerrard played a part in 45% of the Reds' main competition goals in 2008/09. However, as the club's penalty taker, he got to score goals that could easily have otherwise gone to Alonso or Kuyt. That said, several of those penalties —notably 146

those against Atletico Madrid and Manchester United —were won by the captain in the first place. Alonso also scored two penalties, and again, he won one of those himself —at Stamford Bridge in the Champions League —so his involvement was assured even if someone else had scored from the spot.

Goal Involvement – All Assists and Goals

'Assists'

Value

Average

Goals

All-goal

Value

Involvement

Steven Gerrard

22

68

3.08

23

45

Dirk Kuyt

24

66

2.85

15

39

Xabi Alonso

27

79

2.84

5

32

Fernando Torres

14

44

3.15

16

30

Yossi Benayoun

11

34

3.09

9

20

Albert Riera

13

37

2.85

4

17

Robbie Keane

7

18

2.34

7

14

Fabio Aurélio

11

31

2.57

3

14

Ryan Babel

7

24

3.40

4

11

Javier Mascherano

11

30

3.20

0

11

Lucas Leiva

8

21

2.65

2

10

Alvaro Arbeloa

9

22

2.38

1

10

David N'gog

3

9

3.00

3

6

Daniel Agger

4

12

3.00

1

5

Jamie Carragher

5

15

3.38

0

5

Andrea Dossena

2

2

2.00

2

4

Pepé Reina

3

11

3.75

0

3

Nabil El Zhar

2

5

2.50

0

2

Martin Škrtel

2

5

2.50

0

2

Sami Hyypiä

0

0

-

1

1

Jermaine Pennant

1

0

3.00

0

1

Premiership and Champions League goals only.

Gerrard, Kuyt and Alonso really stand out, although Torres' figures are very impressive considering the amount of football he missed.

Therefore, as the players listed above played radically differing amounts of football over the course of the season, it makes sense to examine how *often* they were heavily involved in a goal.

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Minutes Per Goal Involvement

No.of assists Total INV Mins League/CL Mins per involvement

Steven Gerrard

22

45

3227

71.71

David N'gog

3

6

452

75.33

Fernando Torres

14

30

2319

77.30

Dirk Kuyt

24

39

3976

101.95

Xabi Alonso

27

32

3293

102.91

Ryan Babel

7

11

1270

115.45

Yossi Benayoun

11

20

2311

115.55

Nabil El Zhar

2

2

249

124.50

Robbie Keane

7

14

1783

127.36

Albert Riera

13

17

2477

145.71

Fabio Aurélio

11

14

2344

167.43

Lucas Leiva

8

10

1762

176.20

Javier Mascherano

11

11

3030

275.45

Alvaro Arbeloa

9

10

3509

350.90

Daniel Agger

4

5

1756

351.20

Andrea Dossena

2

4

1406

351.50

Jamie Carragher

5

5

4362

872.40

Sami Hyypiä

0

1

1364

1094.00

Martin Škrtel

2

2

2391

1195.50

Pepé Reina

3

3

4300

1433.33

Emiliano Insúa

0

0

Premiership and Champions League goals only.

Note: Jermaine Pennant was involved in one goal, but the number of minutes he played had been removed

from the club's statistics page. Sami Hyypiä's figures have also been removed, and so are estimated based on

1364 overall minutes, minus two games in League Cup and one in the FA Cup.

Looking at these figures, you can see why Lucas is regarded by Benítez as a more attacking option than Mascherano, even though barracked the manager's decision to introduce the latter for the former on occasions last season. Not only did Lucas score two goals in the main competitions (and one in the Carling Cup), his goal involvement in terms of minutes was far better than the Argentine's —although, as previously noted, Mascherano's own involvement was very good for a holding midfielder.

The big surprises are David N'gog and Ryan Babel featuring so prominently on the lists. N'gog sits between two world-class attacking talents, which suggests he makes things happen, even if

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he has yet to really catch the eye. Equally, of course, he's yet to play in any of the really big games.

Babel had a poor season on a number of levels, but his contribution —albeit in cameos —was reasonably significant; every 115 minutes of football he played, he was involved in a goal —the same as Yossi Benayoun —and the quality of his assists was, on average, the best of the entire squad (with the exception of Pepé Reina, whose involvement, due to being 90 yards from goal, has to be a little bit special).

Goal Involvement – Quality of Assists

No. of assists

Quality

Quality Average

Pepé Reina

3

11

3.75

Ryan Babel

7

24

3.40

Jamie Carragher

5

15

3.38

Javier Mascherano

11

30

3.20

Fernando Torres

14

44

3.15

Yossi Benayoun

11

34

3.09

Steven Gerrard

22

68

3.08

David N'gog

3

9

3.00

Daniel Agger

4

12

3.00

Dirk Kuyt

24

66

2.85

Albert Riera

13

37

2.85

Xabi Alonso

0

79

2.84

Lucas Leiva

8

21

2.65

Fabio Aurélio

11

31

2.57

Nabil El Zhar

2

5

2.50

Martin Škrtel

2

5

2.50

Alvaro Arbeloa

9

22

2.38

Robbie Keane

7

18

2.34

Andrea Dossena

2

2

2.00

Emiliano Insúa

0

0

-

Sami Hyypiä

0

0

-

Premiership and Champions League goals only.

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Chapter Fifteen

Goal Importance

“A goal is a goal”, some might say (indeed, myself included, a few pages back). And in terms of a striker’s statistics, or the amount the scoreboard changes by, it’s certainly true. But the value of each goal varies dramatically, depending on the stage of the game and/or the quality of the opposition.

We often rank goals by their beauty, in Goal of the Month/Season competitions, but rarely by their importance. No-one can deny the aesthetics of Fernando Torres’ opener against Blackburn: a sublime turn and volley out of nothing. Genius. But what made it more special was the context: it helped get three points in a must-win game. It kept Liverpool in the title race. It was beauty with meaning and substance. It was Carla Bruni rather than Paris Hilton.

If you win 3-2, the first and second goals are as important as the winner. But if you win 5-2, the fourth goal is marginally less important (although it provides a valuable cushion), and the fifth has slightly less importance still, as it almost certainly kills the game, but you may well have been able to hold out for the win without it.

However, a sixth, seventh or eighth goal would be pretty meaningless, in terms of in terms of the match result, and only really relative to goal difference in the league. The same applies to 150

consolation goals in games already lost. (And while goal difference can be important, it’s once in a blue moon that it makes a major impact on league standings; until Howard Webb’s intervention at Old Trafford, it looked like this could have been one such year —a year in which every goal Liverpool scored would see its meaning magnified. But it was to prove to be no 1989.)

It's important to point out that even a so-called luxury goal can have consequences that reach beyond the result; for instance, it's highly unlikely that Andrea Dossena would have scored the 4th goal at Old Trafford so effortlessly had he not smashed in what was, in terms of Liverpool beating Real Madrid, an 'unnecessary' goal a few days earlier. And then there's the psychological fillip of beating Madrid by four goals, not three, or scoring *four* at Old Trafford; that extra boost it gives can actually be quite significant. So Dossena's goals in both games not only provided a gloss, they also added to the belief of the entire team. With this in mind, I want to make it clear that I don't wish to demean any goal; as the cliché goes, they all count equal, whether scored in the first minute or last, or via a backheel or a backside. However, there's no escaping the fact that some are crucial to the result, while others ice the cake or provide only consolation.

As with the rest of this book, the Premiership is the primary focus, but the Champions League is an equally good barometer by which to judge a player's ability in a way that a League Cup game against Crewe isn't. Therefore, domestic cups are again excluded.

The rankings devised for Goal Importance are as follows:

5 points for a vital strike (first goal/goal that contributes to points won, or is scored at important stage of game even if Reds eventually lost); 4 points for a goal that gives a two-goal cushion, or gets the team back into a game at two goals down; 3 points for a goal that leads to a three-goal winning margin or gets the team back into a game at three goals down; and beyond that, 1 point for 'goal difference' goals.

In addition, goals were ranked according to Quality of Opposition, with another sliding scale: 5 points for top four sides and Everton (on account of the added difficulty of a derby), down to 2 points for relegated sides. (Further explained in key to tables.)

These ratings are obviously somewhat subjective, although they

are based on the league position of opposing teams, and also the relevance to the overall result —both of which are hard to argue with from a factual point of view.

As ever with statistics, they are not designed to be 100% scientific. They are merely a tool —a form of quantifying and qualifying contributions —to shed light on who pops up with vital goals in big games, and who, though he may score a good quantity of goals, gets lots at the end of handsome thrashings or against substandard teams.

Results

The first thing that leaps out from the data is that Fernando Torres actually *improved* last season. Despite playing numerous games handicapped by a lack of match fitness, with at least five or six coming whilst returning from significant injuries, his goals actually influenced games more than the previous season, when the overall goal tally was far higher, but the value of them less.

His 14 league goals were almost all vital (an average of 4.8 out of a possible 5), whereas in 2007/08 his 24 included a greater number that did not influence the result, just added gloss to the scoreline (thus leading to a lower average of 4.3). Equally, the value of his Champions League goals also went up, even though the quantity was lower.

More tellingly, there has been a massive increase in the quality of league opposition he scored against, with an average rising from 2.9 in his debut season (with 3 being the figure of a middling Premiership team), to a whopping 4.0 last season. In other words, the majority of his goals in 2007/08 were against decent (Portsmouth, West Ham, Boro) or poor (Derby) opposition, whereas last season they were mostly against the top four sides, and Everton.

When combining both the importance of the goals and the quality of the opposition, Torres' figures last season were almost perfect. If 5 is scoring only meaningful goals against the best opposition, then you can see what 4.7 means. So not only has his

strike rate remained very impressive, his goals are a big reason why Liverpool's performances and results went up a level last season against the best sides. Of course, the problem then became not

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beating the weaker sides often enough, particularly at Anfield, but we can assume that this would have been remedied to some degree if Torres had played in more of those fixtures. Doing so would have lowered his averages in terms of Quality of Opposition, but there would still have been an improvement on his debut campaign.

Dirk Kuyt was the man whose best asset was timing; he was far less likely to score against the best teams (although he has done so in the past, with strikes against Chelsea, Arsenal and AC Milan), but he was the most likely to pop up at just the right time, either to open the scoring or, at the end of the match, to nab a vital winner or equaliser. Perhaps this is testimony to his great stamina, allied to the attitude that means he will try his hardest from the first minute to the last. Yossi Benayoun was another who scored important goals; indeed, his eight in the league rank as the highest on the list (excluding Sami Hyypiä, who only scored one —the second goal at St James' Park).

Goal Importance – Premiership

Prem goals Prem Goal Average Rank for Average (5+ goals)

Value Total

1

Torres

14

67

4.78

(2)

2

Gerrard

16

65

4.06

(5)

3

Kuyt

12

57

4.75

(3)

4

Benayoun

8

39

4.88

(1)

5

Keane

5

22

4.40

(4)

6

Alonso

4

16

4.00

7

Riera

3

14

4.67

8

Babel

3

12

4.00

9

Aurélio

2

9

4.50

10

N'Gog

2

6

3.00

11

Hyypiä

1

5

5.00

12=

Dossena

1

3

3.00

12=

Arbeloa

1

3

3.00

12=

Lucas

1

3

3.00

12=

Agger

1

3

3.00

Key

First Goal

5

First goal in the game

Winning Goal

5

Goal that ultimately wins the game

Vital Goal

5

Goal that contributes to draw or win

Cushion Goal

4

A goal to give a margin of two goal lead

Comeback Goal

4

A goal to get the team back into the match, irrespective of final result

Margin goal

3

A goal to give a margin of three goal lead, and effectively kill match

G/D goal

1

A goal that has no effect on the game, but helps goal difference

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Quality of Opposition – Premiership

Prem goals Prem Goal Quality of Oppo Value Total Average

1

Torres

14

56

4.0

2

Gerrard

16

54

3.4

3

Kuyt

12

35

2.9

4

Benayoun

8

25

3.1

5

Keane

5

15

3.0

6=

Alonso

4

10

2.5

6=

Riera

3

10

3.3

6=

Babel

3

10

3.3

9

Aurélio

2

8

4.0

10

N'Gog

2

6

3.0

11

Dossena

1

5

5.0

12

Agger

1

3

3.0

13= Hyypiä

1

2

2.0

14= Arbeloa

1

2

2.0

15= Lucas

1

2

2.0

Key

Top 4, Everton 5

UEFA Pos 4 Rest of table 3

Relegated 2

Goal Importance & Quality of Opposition –

Champions League

CL Goals CL Goal Value CL Goal Value CL Qual of Oppo CL Qual of Oppo

Total Average Total

Average

Gerrard

7

31

4.4

30

4.3

Kuyt

3

15

5.0

12

4.0

Torres

2

10

5.0

10

5.0

Keane

2

10

5.0

8

4.0

Lucas

1

5

5.0

5

5.0

Aurélio

1

5

5.0

5

5.0

Benayoun

1

5

5.0

5

5.0

Alonso

1

5

5.0

5

5.0

Riera

1

5

5.0

4

4.0

Babel

1

5

5.0

4

4.0

N'Gog

1

4

4.0

4

4.0

Dossena

1

1

1.0

5

5.0

Key

Major League

5

Winners or reigning champions of Spanish and Italian league

QF team

5

Any team that made it to the quarter-finals

Final 16

4

Any team that made it to the last 16, plus winners or reigning champions of French or German league

Champ of country 3

Winners or reigning champions minor country league

Major league team 3

Any team from Spain, Italy, Germany or France

Minor team

2

All other teams (such as runners-up in Scotland)

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Chapter Sixteen

Rotation

Ah, rotation. How can you write a book dealing with a Rafa Benítez team and not mention it?

It seems that enlightenment still hasn't quite reached the wider world, with Alex Ferguson's far greater number of match-to-match changes still overlooked; even as recently as the spring of 2009 there was a vitriolic article in the national media lambasting the Liverpool manager for disrespecting the methods of Bob Paisley. The Spaniard, in his foolhardy manner, was continuing to ignore the 'best XI every week' philosophy that had worked in the '70s. The crux of the piece was how much the Spaniard rotates compared with the most successful manager in the Reds' history —at the very same time ignoring the fact that the man Benítez is paid to get the better of *does the same thing*. Alex Ferguson was making an even greater number of weekly changes down the East Lincs Road, in what has become the new model for success. If Ferguson has moved with the times, why should Benítez instead have to follow old methods? The logic behind such a suggestion is so absent it beggars belief.

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Rotation Figures 2008/09

Arsenal

Chelsea

Liverpool

Man Utd

Total changes

96

81

115

141

Ave Changes per Game

2.59

2.19

3.11

3.81

Player Apps

100%

0

0

2

0

76-99%

4

7

3

4

51-75%

7

3

6

7

26-50%

7

7

6

7

1-25%

5

7

6

11

Total Used

23

24

23

29

The figures show that as well as rotating less than Alex Ferguson, Benítez also had two ever-presents (Carragher, Reina) to his counterpart's none, and more players who started 76%+ of games: five to four.

In fairness to Ferguson, ten changes were made for the final game of the season, when he was saving bodies for Rome. This corresponds to six more changes than his average over the previous 36 league games, and artificially inflates his figures; so his 'true' total can instead be taken as 135 —still 20 changes more than Benítez made.

Change Frequency & Average Points Per Game

Arsenal Chelsea Liverpool Man Utd

Changes Points

Changes Points

Changes Points

Changes Points

0 changes

2

1.50

4

1.75

1

3.00

1

3.00

1 change

6

2.33

8

2.25

1

1.00

3

1.33

2 changes

11

1.18

11

2.09

10

2.60

5

1.40

3 changes

9

2.56

7

2.00

12

2.33

8

2.50

4 changes

7

1.86

5

2.40

8

2.50

6

3.00

5 changes

0

-

2

3.00

4

1.25

10

2.50

6 changes

1

3.00

0

-

1

0.00

1

3.00

7 changes

1

0.00

0

-

0

-

2

3.00

8 changes

0

-

0

-

0

-

0

9 changes

0

-

0

-

0

-

0

10 changes

0

-

0

-

0

-

1

3.00

11 changes

0

-

0

-

0

-

0

-

37 games qualify for 'rotation', with the first game of the season not applicable.

The *Change Frequency & Average Points Per Game* table highlights why blaming rotation for Liverpool's slip-ups has always been a red herring. Each result depends on so many factors that rotation simply cannot be held responsible. United won most points on average when Ferguson made zero, six, seven or ten changes —winning all eleven of those games —but on the eight occasions on which he made either one or two changes the average points haul was just 1.36 per game, which is decidedly mid-table. The 18 times he made three or five changes resulted in 2.5 points per game, which would equate to 95 points. So clearly it's a fairly random spread of points in relation to changes —because of the myriad other factors that go into determining each and every result. For Liverpool, the 30 times when Benítez made two, three or four changes led to an average of 2.47 points per game —enough to have beaten United to the title by some four points. The seven times he made zero, one, five or six changes, the Reds' form would have seen them relegated in 20th place, with 28 points. This therefore suggests that moderate rotation is the key, with too few or too many changes not helpful —but again, the situations in which these selections were made, and the vagaries of how a game unfolds, cannot be analysed without adding an extra thousand pages to a manuscript like this.

Rotation clearly has more chance of working with better players in reserve, but if players aren't rested it can lead to a massive dip in the final furlong; how much to rotate is debatable, but not rotating at all is dangerous. If Aston Villa had been a horse, they'd have been taken behind the paddock and shot for the lame way they ended the season.

Maybe they simply lost confidence at the wrong time; but Martin O'Neill made just 35 changes to his league line-ups all season long, at a rate of 0.95 per game —precisely four times as few as Ferguson, and far fewer than those made by any of the top

five. O'Neill also often fielded his best side in Europe; the one time he rested his stars they came unstuck in Russia, and he was widely castigated by Villa fans who'd made the long trip. Quite simply, Villa ran out of steam.

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Total Changes – 2006-2009

Changes Made Arsenal Chelsea

Liverpool

Man Utd

2008/09

96

81

115

141

2007/08

74

119

131

117

2006/07

97

103

118

118

Total 2006-2009

267

303

364

376

Alex Ferguson led United to the league title in each of the past three seasons —and yet he did so by making more changes —376 across 114 matches —than Benítez, the man more associated with

the policy. That statistic highlights the inequality in the treatment of the two men. Whether or not it's coincidental, Arsenal ended 2007/08 poorly with Arsène Wenger making by far the fewest amount of changes out of any of the big four managers, but his team ended last season strongly, with the Frenchman having made 25 more team-sheet alterations over the campaign, compared with the previous season..

Chapter Seventeen

Team Sheet Value

So, which Liverpool players made the greatest impact on the team during last season's Premiership campaign? Whose presence tended to end in victories, and whose absence was most keenly felt?

The following tables look at Team Sheet Value, which assesses how the Reds performed with each individual in the side, and also looks at results in their absence.

Win % Premiership 2008/09

Player

Matches Played inc. as sub

Won

%

Emiliano Insúa

10

9

90.0

Daniel Agger

18

14

77.8

David N'Gog

14

10

71.4

Steven Gerrard

31

22

71.0

Xabi Alonso

33

23

69.7

Sami Hyypiä

16

11

68.8

Fernando Torres

24

16

66.7

Martin Škrtel

21

14

66.7

Javier Mascherano

27

18

66.7

Dirk Kuyt

38

25

65.8

Pepé Reina

38

25

65.8

159

Jamie Carragher

38

25

65.8

Yossi Benayoun

32

21

65.6

Álvaro Arbeloa

29

19

65.5

Lucas Leiva

25

16

64.0

Fábio Aurélio

24

16

62.5

Andrea Dossena

16

10

62.5

Albert Riera

28

17

60.7

Nabil El Zhar

15

9

60.0

Robbie Keane

19

11

57.9

Ryan Babel

27

15

55.6

Italics = featured in every game

Emiliano Insúa was the star of this particular category, adding weight to the general positive impression made by the young Argentine full-back. He started nine games and came on as a sub in another, and along with Fernando Torres was the only Red listed not to be on the losing side in the Premiership.

David N'gog also features highly, although as with Insúa, he was unlikely to feature against the toughest sides. Robbie Keane, down near the bottom of the table, might argue that he featured in the side before it hit its stride, although his critics might counter that it was only once he'd left that the balance became right.

Absence Rating – Games Won When Not Played

Player

Total Missed

Won

%

Xabi Alonso

5

2

40.0

Steven Gerrard

7

3

42.9

Daniel Agger

20

11

55.0

Emiliano Insúa

28

16

57.2

David N'Gog

24

15

62.5

Sami Hyypiä

22

14

63.6

Javier Mascherano

11

7

63.6

Fernando Torres

14

9

64.3

Fábio Aurélio

14

9

64.3

Martin Škrtel

17

11

64.7

Yossi Benayoun

6

4

66.7

Álvaro Arbeloa

9

6

66.7

Andrea Dossena

22

15

68.2

Lucas Leiva

13

9

69.2

Nabil El Zhar

23

16

69.6

Robbie Keane

19

14

73.7

Albert Riera

10

8

80.0

Ryan Babel

11

10

90.9

Dirk Kuyt

-

-

-

Pepé Reina

-

-

-

Jamie Carragher

-

-

-

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Xabi Alonso and Steven Gerrard were the two players whose absence was most keenly felt last season —although they only missed twelve games between them, giving only a small sample to assess. Daniel Agger also scores very highly (more on the possible reasons why later). Dirk Kuyt, Pepé Reina and Jamie Carragher featured in every single league game, therefore their value cannot be judged in this way.

Quality and Form

Of course, the previous two tables don't take into account the quality and form of the opposition. While many other vagaries cannot be factored in —the unfolding of a game under the auspices of cause and effect —these two particular aspects are reasonably important in influencing a player's overall average.

Quality of Opposition uses the same ranking system as explained in the Goal Importance section, while the Form rating was reached by looking at a team's five results prior to facing Liverpool, and awarding 1 point for every win, 0.5 for every draw, and 0 for a defeat.

Quality and Form of Opposition *Starts only*

Player

*Form of Opposition Quality of Opposition **Difficulty Rating***

Robbie Keane

3.22

3.63

6.85

Albert Riera

3.00

3.67

6.67

Fernando Torres

3.00

3.60

6.60

Xabi Alonso

2.96

3.52

6.48

Fábio Aurélio

2.79

3.58

6.37

Martin Škrtel

2.78

3.55

6.33

Dirk Kuyt

2.89

3.39

6.28

Daniel Agger

3.03

3.19

6.22

Pepé Reina

2.83

3.37

6.20

Jamie Carragher

2.83

3.37

6.20

Average

2.83

3.37

6.20

Steven Gerrard

2.90

3.27

6.17

Andrea Dossena

2.92

3.25

6.17

Álvaro Arbeloa

2.69

3.41

6.10

Lucas Leiva

2.65

3.38

6.03

Javier Mascherano

2.67

3.30

5.97

Sami Hyypiä

2.79

3.17

5.96

Emiliano Insúa

2.72

3.11

5.83

David N'Gog

2.50

3.00

5.50

Yossi Benayoun

2.43

2.95

5.38

Ryan Babel

2.17

2.67

4.84

Nabil El Zhar

2.50

2.00

4.50

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Robbie Keane's poor showing in the *Win % Premiership 2008/09* table is put into context here. Only Albert Riera on average started games against superior opposition, and Keane also faced teams in good form at the time. The reverse is true of Insúa, whose impressive figures in the same table were in part due to the poor quality and form of the opposition he faced.

Average Points Per Start

Player

Total Starts

Points Per Start (ave)

David N'Gog

2

3.00

Emiliano Insúa

9

2.78

Yossi Benayoun

21

2.43

Daniel Agger

15

2.40

Steven Gerrard

30

2.33

Fábio Aurélio

19

2.32

Fernando Torres

20

2.30

Dirk Kuyt

36

2.28

Álvaro Arbeloa

29

2.28

Xabi Alonso

27

2.26

Pepé Reina

38

2.26

Jamie Carragher

38

2.26

Average

-

2.26

Javier Mascherano

27

2.26

Martin Škrtel

20

2.25

Ryan Babel

6

2.17

Albert Riera

24

2.13

Lucas Leiva

13

2.08

Sami Hyypiä

12

2.08

Robbie Keane

16

2.06

Andrea Dossena

9

1.92

Nabil El Zhar

1

0

As is to be expected, the most frequent starters are grouped together around the average, which was 2.26 points per game. The figures are not particularly dissimilar to those from the Win % table a few pages earlier, although that particular piece of analysis also included substitute appearances.

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Chapter Eighteen

Player Rankings

The following chapter lists the Liverpool squad in descending order, ranked on their overall form last season —as voted by a number of the fans listed at the start of this book. Each player's contribution was scored out of 10.

There is also a brief statistical recap, and in some cases, further discussion of a player's season.

1 Steven Gerrard

9.86

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

3,227

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

12

39

3.25

Secondary Total

10

29

2.90

Assist Total

22

68

3.08

23

45

2 Xabi Alonso

9.52

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

3,293

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

8

21

2.63

Secondary Total

19

58

3.05

Assist Total

27

79

2.84

5

32

163

The pursuit of Gareth Barry in the summer of 2008 meant that Xabi Alonso's days at Liverpool appeared numbered. Interest from Juventus and Arsenal was not matched by sufficiently large offers, while the failure to land the Aston Villa captain meant that a fans' favourite would get at least one more season in the famous red shirt. Whether it was the outpouring of affection from the Kop in the final pre-season friendly, against Lazio, that helped him feel loved; or the success with Spain in the summer's European Championship that fuelled his confidence; or the apparent willingness of Benítez to sell him which created a hunger to prove the manager wrong —the Spanish midfield maestro had his best season since arriving in 2004. He was sublime.

He finished the campaign with five goals, his best tally yet

(although the deflected winner at Stamford Bridge was later deducted from that total by the dubious goals panel, even though it was a shot on target, and therefore should go down as his). Five isn't an incredible amount for a midfielder, but it is a good tally for one who doesn't make runs ahead of the strikers. He also came close to scoring on numerous occasions, most memorably against Fulham and Newcastle (twice), when strikes of the crossbar from distance left him inches away from getting closer to ten goals.

It seemed that he had a bit more licence to get forward in his fifth season, although that could have been down to the team playing better and pushing the opposition back for longer periods, thus affording him more room. The movement of Gerrard, Torres and Kuyt in particular opened up spaces for Alonso to exploit just outside the area, although as in the past, he tended not to get deep into the opposition box.

He spent the summer of 2009 high on Real Madrid's extravagant wish list. But a lot had changed in the previous twelve months: Barry was now at Manchester City, and Alonso himself had seemed to become an invaluable part of Benítez's plans once again. However, Madrid, the ultimate vulturine club, were not going to go away quietly, and at the time of writing, Alonso has allegedly asked to leave Liverpool. At this stage of the team's development, even a £35m transfer fee wouldn't necessarily be as helpful as retaining the services of the Spanish playmaker.

164

3

Fernando Torres

9.48

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

2,319

*Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL
Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT*

Primary Total

7

23

3.29

Secondary Total

7

21

3.00

Assist Total

14

44

3.15

16

30

4

Pepé Reina

8.96

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

4,300

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

2

7

3.50

Secondary Total

1

4

4.00

Assist Total

3

11

3.75

0

3

5

Dirk Kuyt

8.74

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

3,976

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

14

39

2.80

Secondary Total

10

27

2.90

Assist Total

24

66

2.85

15

39

6

Javier Mascherano 8.56

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

3,030

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

2

7

3.50

Secondary Total

8

23

2.90

Assist Total

11

30

3.20

0

11

165

7

Jamie Carragher

8.50

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

4,362

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

1

4

4.00

Secondary Total

4

11

2.75

Assist Total

5

15

3.38

0

5

8

Yossi Benayoun

8.14

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

2,311

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

6

19

3.17

Secondary Total

5

15

3.00

Assist Total

11

34

3.09

9

20

9

Martin Škrtel

8.08

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

2,391

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

2

5

2.50

Secondary Total

0

0

-

Assist Total

2

5

2.50

0

2

10 Sami Hyypiä

8.04

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

1,364

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Secondary Total

0

0

0.00

Primary Total

0

0

-

Assist Total

0

0

0.00

1

1

Despite the offer of a further year's contract and the option of a coaching role, Sami Hyypiä finally called time on his Liverpool career, opting to move to Bayer Leverkusen, with the carrot of 166

a two-year deal and the prospect of regular football proving too tempting to resist. His departure came after 464 games, placing him 20th in the club's all-time list, and 2nd in overseas players, behind Bruce Grobbelaar.

While fully deserved, and an emotional occasion, in some ways it was a shame that Sami Hyypiä was given his send-off against Spurs on the final day of the season. Had he not been sent on for the final few minutes (during which time he was inches from scoring), his final action in a Liverpool shirt would have been as an emergency starter against Manchester United in a 4-1 victory. Somehow that would have been a more fitting finale for the Finn than a largely meaningless end of season stroll against Spurs. But of course, the fans deserved their chance to say goodbye to an incredibly popular professional, and it was a beautiful moment when the icy centre-back understandably broke down in tears. Liverpool have lost a player whose regular presence in the first team was no longer required, but whose experience and reliability will be virtually impossible to replace.

11 Daniel Agger

7.64

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

1,756

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

2

9

4.5

Secondary Total

2

3

1.5

Assist Total

4

12

3

1

5

12 Álvaro Arbeloa

7.42

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

3,509

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

5

15

3.0

Secondary Total

4

7

1.75

Assist Total

9

22

2.375

1

10

167

13 Fábio Aurélio

7.24

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

2,344

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

8

25

3.13

Secondary Total

3

6

2.00

Assist Total

11

31

2.57

3

14

14 Emiliano Insúa

7.15

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

860

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Secondary Total

0

0

0.00

Primary Total

0

0

-

Assist Total

0

0

0.00

0

0

15 Albert Riera

7.11

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

2,477

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

5

14

2.80

Secondary Total

8

23

2.90

Assist Total

13

37

2.85

4

17

16 Lucas Leiva

6.54

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

1,762

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

5

13

2.60

Secondary Total

3

8

2.70

Assist Total

8

21

2.65

2

10

168

17 Robbie Keane 6.30

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

1,783

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

6

16

2.67

Secondary Total

1

2

2.00

Assist Total

7

18

“People will know that you are an international football player, you’ve always scored goals at the highest level. If that’s his [Benítez] view and he didn’t give you a chance to play in the team, he’s probably not right is he?”

This quotation comes from a BBC interview with Robbie Keane, shortly after the striker rejoined Spurs, following a disappointing six months at the club who were supposed to have been his boyhood favourites. The interviewer is clearly trying to steer Keane toward a damning statement. The man posing the questions continues: “It’s been suggested to me that the Liverpool dressing room isn’t the happiest with the relationship between some of the Liverpool players and the Liverpool manager.”

It’s hard to know exactly what kind of treatment Keane was expecting from Benítez, but it’s clear that the manager’s methods work.

There is no definitively right or wrong way to run a team: some managers try to be the players’ best friend, and some have the personality to pull it off; others, employing the same approach, can come across as desperate people-pleasers who open themselves up to exploitation and abuse. Then there are those who keep their distance. Bill Shankly inspired his players, but if they weren’t fit or in form, he could treat them like they were nothing to him; players were expected to be ‘man enough’ to deal with it.

Of course, in this day and age players are more pampered, with the balance of power firmly swung in their direction. But that could suggest the hard-line approach is more appropriate than ever; indulged individuals don’t have much incentive to deliver, although different players will always respond better to a certain

players as equals, with little boosting of their egos and minimal personal contact beyond the professional. Those who need an arm around the shoulder may occasionally get one, but on the whole those who need too much emotional help won't be kept around too long. Again, it comes back to strength of character. It won't be conducive to some players producing their best form, but it creates a sense of consistency, and a desire to earn a place in the team, rather than expect one. The atmosphere becomes one of hard work, and it's been reflected in the year-on-year improvement of the side. England manager Fabio Capello is cut from the same cloth, and look at the difference he has made to the side after the ill-fated reign of Steve McLaren, who tried to be all things to all men.

And let's be clear: Liverpool's dressing room hardly seemed like an unhappy place after Keane's departure; unrest and dissent does not lead to such impressive results. As at Valencia, there may be those players who are not overly fond of Benítez, but there won't be any who don't respect him.

Keane rejoined Spurs on 2nd February, with the January transfer window extended due to adverse weather conditions. In the 20 games after he was sold (including Chelsea at home on 1st February, when he was left out of the squad during negotiations with Spurs), Liverpool scored 50 goals at a rate of 2.5 per game, whereas in the 34 games up to his departure, the Reds notched just 56, at a rate of 1.6 per game. Keane himself struggled to excel at his old club, netting a moderate five times in 14 games, including one penalty. He did score at Anfield on the final day of the season, and to his credit refused to celebrate, but by then it was pretty clear that Liverpool had gone from strength to strength in his absence.

At Liverpool, Keane had scored at a rate of one goal every 255 minutes of football. While not technically 'replacing' him, David

Ngog's minutes-per-goal ratio (197) was far better, and not too far behind those of Torres (164) and Gerrard (147). Keane's strikerate was better than those posted by Benayoun (276) and Kuyt (289), but the latter two spent most of their time in midfield.

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While Keane will have to go down as a signing that didn't work out, it was better to cut the club's losses and take a hit of few million pounds' transfer fee (at the same time saving a couple of million in wages for the remainder of the season) than lose a bigger amount further down the line —such as the £14m Manchester United lost on Juan Sebastian Veron, or the £30m Chelsea will on Andrei Shevchenko.

Once players near 30, their value drops rapidly. If something's not working, it's imperative that a manager move quickly, particularly if he is operating on a limited budget and needs to reinvest any funds. In order to start his summer transfer business as soon as the season ended, Benítez had to offload Keane there and then; particularly as the protracted cat and mouse game that inevitably ensues —and indeed, had with Keane, who only moved as part of the January transfer window *in February* —might have meant a sale taking until August. A delayed departure delays arrivals. Furthermore, Spurs might not have been so desperate at a later date.

Although quoted as being as low as £12m by some sources, the £19m upper limit of the transfer fee when all add-ons are activated (which Spurs have to be prepared to pay) is a good amount for a player who turns 29 this year; an overpayment, just as the Reds overpaid for his services in the summer. In all likelihood, £15m will end up being the figure the Londoners pay. Of course, much of any transfer fee relates to the need of the buying club.

In the summer of 2008, Keane appeared to be just what Liverpool needed. It turned out that he wasn't.

18 David Ngog

6.23

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

452

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

3

9

3.00

Secondary Total

0

0

-

Assist Total

3

9

3.00

3

6

171

19 Ryan Babel

6.10

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

1,270

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

4

14

3.50

Secondary Total

3

10

3.30

Assist Total

7

24

3.40

4

11

20 Nabil El Zhar

5.96

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

249

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Primary Total

1

2

2.00

Secondary Total

1

3

3.00

Assist Total

2

5

2.50

0

2

21 Andrea Dossena

5.60

Premiership and Champions League Minutes

1,406

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Secondary Total

2

2

2.00

Primary Total

0

0

-

Assist Total

2

2

2.00

2

4

22 Jermaine Pennant

5.25

Number of Involvement Average Quality Goals TOTAL GOAL

Goals 'Assisted' Value of Assistance Scored INVOLVEMENT

Secondary Total

0

0

-

Primary Total

0

0

3.00

Assist Total

1

3

3.00

0

1

172

Conclusion

Twenty Years On....

As we have discovered, by rights, Liverpool FC, with its resources and its wider wherewithal, should be finishing 4th in the Premiership —maybe even 5th, now that Manchester City are supposedly the richest club in the world.

But if you look at the team Benítez has assembled, there's nothing remotely 4th-rate about it whatsoever.

Realistic hopes of a 19th title abound. It has been a gradual process, but Liverpool are nearly there; at the very least, they will be taken very seriously by all and sundry in 2009/10. However, no guarantees exist, and problems —serious injuries, unrest behind the scenes —can appear out of nowhere to wreck the dream. And sometimes a rival has a season of near-perfection that is impossible to match.

All Liverpool can do is focus on their own game, and continue improving. To win that 19th title will take the best performances and the best decisions by all those involved.

Perhaps most crucially, the Reds have gone back to the past —but purely in a forward-thinking appointment —by bringing 'King'

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Kenny Dalglish back to the club.

His return will almost certainly make a great impact on fans, players and the club as a whole —not just on those he will be dealing with at the Academy. Symbolically his is an appointment that exceeds the job he has been brought in to do; almost like a war cabinet being able to call upon Winston Churchill.

Even if he just sits there and makes the tea, his presence would lift his allies and alarm the opposition. And it is factors such as this that can help elevate Liverpool above its supposed limitations, and help

the club to move confidently towards ending that long wait for the league title —last achieved when Dalglish himself was at the helm. May 2010 will mark the 20th anniversary of that achievement, and it goes without saying that all Kopites know how they want to mark the occasion.

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the Red Race companion:

‘Fact Pack’

Statistics compiled for this book, but excluded in order to avoid overloading the project with numbers, can be found in a specially designed PDF, which will be available for download from my website.

It also includes the full lists of the teams and squads on which a number of calculations were made.

www.paultomkins.com/redrace.html

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**A special thank-you to the kind
sponsors of this book:**

Peter Hewitson

JiNG cHee Lim

Dinesh selvaratnam

mr JAMES m JONES

steve mccarthy

keith murphy

Hemal shah

Laurance Hoagland

J,rgen Dehn

DARReN eYLes

Derrick Leonard

David edwards

mathew edwards

JAN GROOtZ

Wally Gowing

Daks Pratley

chun shin Ng

edward breithaupt

Westlee Wallace

tom Headey

ian tickle

samuel miller

Owen Joyce

Bertrand mARtiN

chris ings

kenny Archer

msc (toronto)

khairil izam

Laurent sampers

N Rungruangsiriphan

Fady ibrahim

Derek Dunphy

Ziyad edward Akkawi

stuARt eDWARDs

stephanie Dunphy

kevin thompson

Nicholas Dutton

keith Hanna

neil boughey

moses Lim

Dominic Wong

eric Young

Jim saul

sverre sydnes

colin mackey

Robert Walsh
Hamid Gharda
amal ali husein
Jeffrey Quantrill
shawn Warswick
Aziz Ait-Braham
Angus Freeman
Les mccullough
ian Fowler
mohd Hafiz Zulfakar
John crossley
simon watling
elisabeth uggerloese
Li chong Jin
martin Latham
i t Friel
Gary Boland
sim Jason
mARk DOYLe
Beryl Reid
Goh Joo How
Finin martin
Jonathan symes
Abhijit sahasrabudhe
Abdullah Ahmed
timothy morgan
Angela Nolan
Faina shpiro
steve Bingham
lawrence harvey
Paul childs
stephen cooke

Andy Rawlinson

steven townley

Andrew Nicholson

michael brady

stuart Lloyd

G Yip

yuen khiang lim

LiNDsAY iLes

moustafa Fawzy

chris Reavy (Happy 50th!)

chloe Guttridge

DALe stOkes

Raj Brar

bobby moran

eric Young

mike eccles (“Dog ears”)

cHRistOPHeR m WiLLiAms

eDDie JOsePH ROccA

steve wilson

ann-marie barton

Nyee Loong chin

Frank tole

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