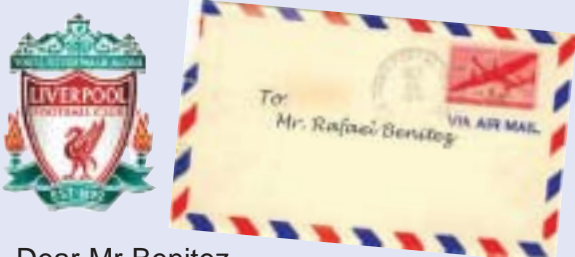


Rafa, you're letting Liverpool fans down

Sportsmail's Jim Mansell, a fervent but despairing Liverpool fan, pens an open letter to his club's manager after their humiliating Champions League defeat to Marseille at Anfield:



Dear Mr Benitez,

I felt compelled to write to you following Liverpool's abject display against Marseille. I have a fear that you are blind to the one key element which is vital to any successful team - consistency.

In my view the Champions League defeat on Wednesday hardly matters a jot - though not to qualify for the knockout stages would be humiliating enough - but was a clear manifestation of the problems thrown up by your baffling rotation system.

Let's be frank. Your changes are infuriating Liverpool fans. I haven't spoken to one who thinks it's the right policy or that it will win us the prize we most cherish - the Premier League.

We've been waiting since 1990 for a sniff of the Holy Grail - and gritted our teeth as Manchester United, Arsenal and Chelsea have dominated.

They have done it by moulding teams which play at a high level of consistency. Barring loss of form and injury, the manager has picked virtually the same players week in, week out.

They became teams and developed a pattern of play to suit.

Currently, this does not seem to apply to Liverpool. You made another bucketload of changes for the Marseille game from the team that scraped a 1-0 away win at Wigan. Not surprisingly, they played like strangers. As Robin van Persie said this week Arsenal benefit by having the same team because the players like it that way.

How can Crouch be expected to perform if he's hardly given a look-in? How can Torres be the 20-goals-a-season striker the team desperately needs if he's not in the starting line-up for games against the likes of Portsmouth and Birmingham? How can the midfield develop an understanding if it's chopped and changed so much?

I heard you say in an interview recently that your policy was designed to ensure the players were in peak fitness for the run-in to the Champions League and the title.

That's no good if the team are not in contention for either due to poor performances in the rest of the season.

Your summer buys gave us hope that the title would be a realistic target. The season started brightly. Don't let that flicker of hope be extinguished so quickly.

On behalf of all title-starved Liverpool fans, pick a team to win the league and stick with it.

You gave us a truly unbelievable triumph in Istanbul. And a memorably nerve-wracking FA Cup success. But, Mr Benitez, we're desperate to be the best team in the Premier League.

What we can't stomach is a rotation policy which will see the names of just United, Chelsea and Arsenal on the Premier League trophy for another 17 years!

Yours in hope

Old Trafford stripped of Man Utd's swagger



By Tim Rich

It is the ambition of any manager to create a team who play like Arsenal, although this season Manchester United resemble the old machine run by George Graham, the one that needed only a single goal to take three points.

It is probably just as well the Glazer family do not put the same emphasis on excitement as Roman Abramovich, a man who could part company with the most successful manager in Chelsea's history after rumours his victories were insufficiently entertaining. Sir Alex Ferguson has been accused of many things, but never of sending out teams that were grimly efficient.

When the Glazers used so much of other people's money to buy United it would have been on the understanding that at Old Trafford entertainment came as standard. But this season the ground has been something seldom seen under Ferguson, a stadium stripped of its old imperial swagger, a ground that by the start of October

has celebrated six goals.

"It is a disease; we are still looking for a vaccine for it," smiled Ferguson when reminded that this was the sixth 1-0 victory Manchester United have chiselled out in eight games. But since each goal at Old Trafford has produced two points, it is a disease that is not harmful, let alone fatal.

And yet it irritates. At half-time, Ferguson complained his team had been "too safe; in football you have to take a risk". This is a philosophy the Italian game has never accepted but then Italian football never forced season-ticket holders to buy tickets for cup games, as United do.

Had the first taste of compulsory football been last April's 7-1 destruction of Roma or even the desperate comeback to overcome AC Milan 3-2 in the first leg of the European Cup semi-final that followed, there might have been fewer complaints.

As it was your £26 bought you a 2-0 Carling Cup defeat by Coventry that left

Ferguson "flabbergasted" and provided further evidence the latest batch of his "fledglings" are unlikely to fly far. And then there was this; an illustration that however great the quality on display, you cannot repeat great matches to order.

Thus far United have been outstanding in only one area - the central defensive partnership of Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic that could claim to be the best in the Champions League.

And yet the lack of cohesion has not been reflected in results, mainly because there has always been enough individual talent to ride to the rescue. Here it was Wayne Rooney's first strike of a fitful season. At Birmingham, it was Cristiano Ronaldo's eye for goal. At Goodison Park it was Vidic's power and speed at a set piece.

As a long-term strategy, it cannot last. Sooner or later, this latest remodelled United must gel but then much the same was said of Chelsea when they tried to shoehorn Michael Ballack

and Andrei Shevchenko into one of the most ruthlessly-successful winning machines English football has seen. And in Jose Mourinho's final campaign, he increasingly relied on one individual, Didier Drogba, to salvage his season.

Part of the Americanisation of Old Trafford's 'match-day experience' involves playing the theme tune to Rocky before kick-off. In the original movie, as Sylvester Stallone pounds Apollo Creed's ribs, the champion screams he does not want a rematch.

This is a sound principle in sport. It is probably just as well Real Madrid never organised a rematch with Eintracht Frankfurt after the giddy 1960 European Cup final in Glasgow that had a young Ferguson among the audience. Roma's last visit to Manchester had been a bare-knuckle fight to the finish. With both teams likely to qualify for the knockout stages, this was Rocky Lite, a punch-up with headguards. -TELEGRAPH.UK