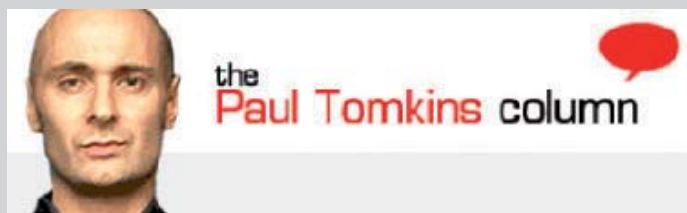


Managers & Misconceptions



Aside from the fact that I'm a longwinded, pompous gasbag who takes a dubious photo, there's a specific approach I bring to writing this column.

I do not see my role as one of being judge, jury and executioner on the manager's decisions. These people are everywhere in the media, after all. Rather than judge and condemn, I try to understand his thinking. For me, that's the only way to approach it.

I am not arrogant enough to suggest I know better than a man who has won two Spanish league titles (against all odds), a European Cup (against all odds), a Uefa Cup and an FA Cup in the last five years, as well as taking the Reds to 82 points in the league, something not previously done for 18 years...and all achieved on a far lower budget than that of the two teams to win the league title during his time at Anfield.

He's also just given the club its best start in ages, with 11 games unbeaten and the fewest goals conceded for 30 years, as well as an average of two goals scored each game. And yet still he's not exempt from heavy criticism.

My respect for what any Liverpool manager has to face has grown immeasurably since I began writing this column in 2005. I get a deluge of responses on my opinions, via emails and on various forums. Everything I say is scrutinised to the nth degree. Plenty of people wholeheartedly agree with my opinions, but plenty also violently disagree.

So how can a manager please everyone, with so many contrasting opinions on the game out there? I can't get even close to pleasing everyone, and I only write about football.

Some fans want only attractive football. Other fans want winning football at any cost. Some fans want more locals in the team. Other fans don't care who's in the team so long as they're committed, and it wins. Some fans like an abundance of flair players. Others get their kicks (no pun intended) from players who get stuck in. A lot of fans deplore lazy players, but some are willing to make exceptions if they like the look of some coveted tricky talent in another team.

Part of the struggle I have as I get older is in deciding what exactly is a managerial mistake. I think it's too easy to spout off and, in so doing,

make a bigger mistake than the man in question.

We all know what looks like a mistake. But does that mean it actually is a mistake? Can mistakes be judged in the moment, or does it take time for all of the ramifications and repercussions to become clear?

Going back to the Torres controversy, if he stays fit and sharp and Liverpool go on to win the league, will it still have been a mistake to omit him against Birmingham? Of course not. Similarly, if Liverpool don't win the league, will it be one of the issues people will have a right to bring up? Of course it will.

At the same time, leaving Torres out of one match is not going to win the league — or indeed lose it — in itself. Thousands of other factors will play a part between now and May. And in many ways it's a decision we cannot accurately measure at this point, because of the long-term picture, not to mention the vagaries of cause and effect. Perhaps the chances of beating Birmingham were lessened by his absence; but perhaps chances of winning future games were improved. No-one can say for sure.

I remember doing my absolute nut when we were 1-0 up at home to West Ham in 2005/06 and, with about 20 minutes to go, the manager took off Cissé and brought on Zenden. I was fuming. Then Zenden popped up with a goal within a few minutes to secure a 2-0 win. It taught me a lesson I still put to use to this day: wait and see, even if I feel the manager has made an error. It's too easy to make snap judgements.

I also hated zonal marking on set-pieces at first, before I understood how it could benefit the team. Since some serious early teething problems, Liverpool have been superb at defending corners and indirect free-kicks. Since the autumn of 2004, problems have only really arisen briefly when new defenders or goalkeepers have been introduced. Once sure of their role in the system, they soon fall into line, figuratively and literally speaking.

Benítez was heavily criticised in January 2005 for resting some players in the cup game against Burnley. Last season, Paul Merson openly mocked Benítez's team selection against Arsenal in the Carling Cup. With Barcelona awaiting

in the next round of the Champions League, he said Liverpool's season was over; thrown away by Benítez not picking a strong enough side.

Both times the Reds went on to make the final of the Champions League. Resting players in the league is always going to be a more emotive issue, but it's all aimed at staying in contention in all competitions until the spring and then, to use the obvious pun, finishing with a spring in the step.

This year, with an even bigger squad, the Carling Cup could actually be an important competition for Liverpool. Winning it won't suddenly make it more highly valued, but it's a chance to give games to the whole squad. With some players, Benítez will be looking not to overplay them; with others, he will be looking for games in which to play them, to keep them sharp and to have them feel involved.

Indeed, one of Benítez's selections against Reading arguably led to the Reds beating Wigan in the league: Yossi Benayoun scored his first goal for the club at the Madejski, and some goal at that. He took that confidence to the JJB, and yet again jinked past players with Beardsleyesque movement before scoring the winner. In the space of four days, Benayoun showed why he could prove a canny acquisition.

The players a manager buys are another area where he's seen to either succeed or fail. But even then, there's a key difference between a mistake and a failure.

Players can fail for a number of reasons. Of course, some of those might be down to the manager, if he doesn't get the best out of each



individual.

But there are a number of other factors, like injuries and homesickness, or adapting to new ideas, that can't necessarily be foreseen. Then there's the fact that a manager might buy a good player, but that player has to then compete with an even better player in order to just get a game. Not every player is bought to be an immediate first-choice.

Was it a mistake, for example, to buy Fernando Morientes? I still don't think it was. Did Morientes succeed? Not really. But it's a decision that made sense at the time. And if, in training, he helped other players develop their game, he could have improved the team beyond his stay at the club. But something like that latter point is fairly impossible to measure. Liverpool did very well during Morientes' time at the club, so maybe that's enough?

The clear mistakes are those players who (often) cost a lot of money, sulk, disrupt morale, and leave having offered nothing constructive either on or off the pitch during their time. You don't always have to be a massive success as an individual on the pitch, but if you provide an influence, that can be a redeeming factor.

What does look a great piece of management is the procurement of Torres; so successful has it been that we naturally want him to play every game. But even Torres needs time before being called an outright success; Liverpool legends are not formed in a handful of games. But few Liverpool legends have started their careers in more impressive fashion, and for that we should be encouraged.

So while I don't see myself as defending Benítez irrespective of his decisions, I do preach the 'wait and see' approach. A football season is a long time, with ups and downs guaranteed along the way. And Benítez proved in Spain that his methods can work in a league campaign, even though his rotation policy was heavily criticised there, too.

In my new book, "Above Us Only Sky" (not to be confused with "Above Us Only Sky: A Woman at Midlife Looks Back, Ahead, and into the Mirror" — although some may feel this to be the kind of book I am more suited to writ-

ing), I dedicated 25,000 words (a quarter of its entirety) to what I think Liverpool need to do to win that elusive 19th league title.

In truth, it's more about exposing every last myth I could think of as to what you shouldn't do, be it rotation or zonal marking or a certain formation or a particular style of football.

Where popular wisdom tells us that a manager "has to do this, and can't do that", examples to the contrary are everywhere. There are no hard and fast rules. Each manager has to do what is best for his team, and work with his own resources. Every manager at the top clubs has inherited different players, spent a vastly different amount of money, and been in the job for a different length of time.

Ferguson has spent a lot more money on his current squad than Benítez, and had much more time to shape it. Mourinho, also appointed in 2004, had had the same time, but far, far more money (it's too soon to judge Avram Grant). Wenger, until this summer, had a squad that cost fractionally more than Liverpool's, but he's had four times longer in his job. (Many of the excellent young players in his current team were procured between 2002 and 2004, when Benítez was still in Spain.)

Indeed, when it comes to time in the job and the cost of his squad, the closest comparison to Benítez is Martin Jol.

But of course, our ambitions far outstrip the recent achievements of Sunday's opponents. We expect to be challenging for league titles, and rightly so; this year, we should be in the hunt. But like Wenger all those years ago, Benítez, still without a budget to compare with Chelsea and United's, is rebuilding the club from top to bottom. Like it or not, that takes time, especially when it comes to promising youngsters coming through.

Perhaps the desire amongst fans to win the league at all costs this season has also been ratcheted up by United winning the league title last season, followed by their unexpectedly poor start to this, plus Chelsea's spectacular implosion, which seemed to leave the field open.

Like all managers, Benítez may make mistakes this season. But May is the time to judge exactly what they were - not now. -Liverpoolfc.tv