

Inter Milan bring out best in Carragher

By Alan Smith

You couldn't say, in all honesty, that this has been the best of seasons so far for Jamie Carragher. Having started off slowly, Liverpool's durable centre-half has found it hard going at times. Very much like his manager, in fact. Very much like his team as a whole.

The inspirational performances that peppered previous campaigns, notably the two that ended with places in the Champions League final, haven't, as yet, been so memorably repeated. Not that this is Carragher's fault particularly. With the team searching for a purpose, struggling for direction, the fall-out is bound to affect personal displays.

Tuesday night was a little different though - practically a one-off in light of the uncertainty swirling around Anfield. For 90 minutes every Liverpool player could forget about domestic strife, about the future of Rafael Benitez, knowing a Champions League win against Inter Milan would give this famous club something solid to grasp.

On such evenings, what's more, no one is better than Liverpool's vice-captain at responding to the challenge.

No one gets more pumped up, is more determined to succeed, the high tension and stakes tending to bring out the best in this fierce competitor. A good job, too, if you're a Liverpool fan seeing as Inter came bearing a couple of high-class strikers in the shape of Julio Cruz and Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

And while Carragher may have been conceding plenty of inches and pounds to Ibrahimovic, whenever the giant striker received the ball into feet, he felt someone snapping at his heels, preventing him from turning. Typical Carragher - like a dog with a bone, he wouldn't let go.

In one way, Marco Materazzi's first-half dismissal may have left the boy from Bootle feeling slightly frustrated given that his task changed complexion for a while afterwards. Inter's top scorer dropped back to help out in midfield as the Italian champions sought to stay nice and compact.

After the break, though, Ibrahimovic returned to a more adventurous role, just to make sure Carragher and Sami Hyypia remained on their toes. They did as well, which made a change from some of the slack defending seen here last Saturday.

My imagination, perhaps, but there was something a little disturbing about Carragher's body language as Barnsley's Brian Howard lined up the last-minute shot that dumped Liverpool out of the FA Cup. Rather than charging headlong at the danger man, as you would normally expect, or at least making himself big to try to protect his goal, Carragher stood off, even turning his back as the ball flew past. It just wasn't like him. An air of resignation seemed to have set in.

Not this time though. On his 99th European outing, a Liverpool record, there was nothing resigned about his demeanour in this tense match, even if for long periods he was left with little to do. The evening was more about Liverpool's frustrations up at the other end, until Dirk Kuyt's opener and Steven Gerrard's second, which provided some welcome breathing space for the second leg.

Without doubt, then, some pride had been restored throughout the ranks. And while Carragher may have enjoyed one of his quieter nights in this competition, in the space of three days he, like his team-mates, had become a winner again.

Carragher

