

Liverpool's results so far "too close for comfort" according to Steven Gerrard



Gerrard

As he recuperates from his groin operation, there will be relief as well as frustration in Steven Gerrard's bones.

As he remarked after Liverpool's nervy 1-0 victory over Standard Liege that saw them through to the Champions League draw: "If you'd asked me if I'd be happy with two wins out of two in the League and making it through to the Champions League"

Nevertheless, Gerrard, who played in Wednesday night's qualifier only after consulting the club doctor, faces the prospect of missing two of the biggest matches of his season. He is definitely out of England's World Cup qualifier in Croatia and, given the two-week recovery period from yesterday's operation, there must be some doubt whether he will be involved in Liverpool's next home match, against Manchester United on Sept 13.

Gerrard can sometimes be brutally honest but his view that Liverpool have not deserved their results is one that is shared throughout the squad. It has all been in the words of their captain "too close for comfort".

When Anfield is in need of a late goal, eyes inevitably turn towards Gerrard and Fernando Torres, but Pepe Reina, who had been preparing for a penalty shoot-out the moment the tie slipped into extra-time, said he was not surprised the winner had been scored by Dirk Kuyt. "It is his competition," remarked the Liverpool goalkeeper.

When it took Kuyt the whole of his first season on Merseyside to find the net in the Champions League those would have seemed risible words. And yet his record now bears comparison with Torres himself. When he drove home Ryan Babel's cross, with a shoot-out two minutes away, it was his ninth goal in his last 15 European games for Liverpool; Torres' record, incidentally, is six in 12.

This was worth anything between £10-20 million depending on Liverpool's progress and many of the Dutchman's goals have been valuable ones. Not a bad return from a centre-forward pushed out to the right wing.

Yet, as he replayed the game, Kuyt, like Gerrard, was aware that snatching results against the run of play is no basis for any sort of campaign. "It was a very difficult match for us," he said. "We haven't given our best performances yet and maybe we have had a lot of luck, but one day your luck will run out and then we will have to perform really well to win."

Gerrard added that Javier Mascherano and Lucas Leiva, who paraded their Olympic gold and bronze medals before kick-off, will return to the squad for the encounter at Aston Villa on Sunday. And with Albert Riera's signing due to be completed before then, Rafael Benitez will have reinforcements at his disposal.

No easy rides for flawed Arsenal and Liverpool

It is rash to believe that English clubs now have an ineffable superiority in Europe



Even England's top-four elite has its upper and lower classes. The division persisted in the Champions League when Arsenal and Liverpool were assigned uncomfortable quarters. It is not utterly inconceivable that one or both could be eliminated at a group stage that has been seen of late as a sort of stretching exercise in which this country's teams warm up for the more strenuous business to come.

At the moment any sort of fixture appears perilous in particular for Liverpool, who might have been eliminated by Standard Liège in the qualifying round. On all known form under Rafael Benítez, they will show more competence as time passes. His worst season in the tournament with the club still saw the side get to the last 16 before being knocked out by Benfica in 2006.

For all that, there have been moments of vulnerability, too, and only 10 months have passed since Marseille won 1-0 at Anfield in the competition. The margin for error may have shrunk this year. It was bad enough for Liverpool to be pitted against a Spanish club, let alone an Atlético Madrid line-up that was drubbing Schalke 4-0, with Diego Forlan among the scorers, while Benítez's squad wheezed past Liège.

A steady PSV are not to be disparaged either and they knocked Tottenham out of the Uefa Cup in March. While Liverpool struggle to find form they have to be wary, specifically, about a team such as Marseille that is striving to better itself. The club, for instance, paid £9.5m this summer to winkle the highly regarded attacker Hatem Ben Arfa out of Lyon.

Even with the loss of Djibril Cissé to Sunderland, Eric Gerets' side still has menace in the diminutive form of the Ivorian striker Bakari Koné. Marseille top the League in France at the moment, but their fallibility has not been banished entirely. They opened the campaign with a helter-skelter 4-4 draw with Rennes.

That has a comfortingly familiar ring to it for Benítez, whose side won 4-0 at the Vélodrome last season. The task for Liverpool now is to regain such form, but Marseille will believe they are improving steadily. It would be unwise for the Anfield team or Arsenal to suppose that domination is theirs by right. Each of these two English clubs is under scrutiny.

The depth of Arsenal's squad may be tested in Group G where the away matches could be gruelling. There will be references to the torrid atmosphere in Istanbul but the ability in the Fenerbahce ranks may also be disturbing. Luis Aragonés, having managed Spain to glory at Euro 2008, is in charge there and he has a couple of his countrymen around, such as the striker Daniel Güiza, as well as the Brazilian Roberto Carlos who had such an association with Real Madrid.

Arsène Wenger may wish, too, that Porto's exclusion from this season's Champions League, following allegations over the bribery of referees five seasons ago, had not been overturned on appeal. They are far from the peak attained in Jose Mourinho's time, but the club has still been champions of Portugal for three consecutive seasons. The journey to Ukraine will also be forbidding. Dynamo Kiev's 8-2 aggregate rout of Spartak

Moscow in the final qualifying round is more imposing than even Arsenal's 6-0 aggregate canter against Twente.

It is rash to believe that English clubs now have an ineffable superiority. There may not have been a final without a Premier League member taking part since 2004, but Liverpool and Arsenal supporters would not claim, at this moment, that their teams are without flaw.

United and Chelsea belong in a different category because of the extent of their squads, even if many of Sir Alex Ferguson's personnel congregate in the treatment room at present. They have the means to be at ease. Villarreal were narrowly beaten by Arsenal in the Champions League semi-finals in 2006 and Celtic did beat United in Glasgow the following season, but it is hard to conceive of the Old Trafford club finishing behind both of them, or suffering against Aalborg.

Group A has that kind of feel as well. Could Roma and Laurent Blanc's Bordeaux both surpass Chelsea and compel Luiz Felipe Scolari's men to keep sorrowful company with the Romanians Cluj? It is unthinkable. The nature of the Premier League must be echoed in the Champions League.

At Anfield and the Emirates there are problematic areas in each line-up. While an Arsenal fan wonders about defensive midfield duty, his counterpart in Liverpool looks on in annoyance at ineffectiveness on the flanks. All four English clubs may well go through to the knock-out stage in the end, but there will be reminders that Premier League ascendancy may be far from effortless.