

Unwanted and unloved, but now Alonso is firing

The Spaniard Liverpool wanted to sell to Juventus this summer is now a key player for the table-topping team, writes Ian Herbert

As Jamie Carragher once so delicately put it, Xabi Alonso does not tend to command "short odds on the first goalscorer betting slip", so it was of no surprise to anyone that he was quick yesterday to claim as his own the deflected goal which put Liverpool top of the pile on Sunday.

"It was my goal," Alonso said of the effort which Chelsea's Jose Bosingwa deflected past Petr Cech. "The shot was on its way towards the goal when it was deflected but that happens, that's part of football and you have to cope with these things when they go for you and when they go against."

Since Alonso has experienced considerably more of the latter than the former in a general footballing sense over the course of the past four months, there can be few more deserving matchwinners at a place like Stamford Bridge than him. There will always be personal scores to settle for Alonso where Chelsea are concerned – Eidur Gudjohnsen's admission that he feigned injury to get him suspended from the second leg of the clubs' Champions League semi-final second leg in 2005, for instance. But Alonso has had something more substantial to prove about himself since a summer in which, while the 26-year-old was busy contributing to Spain's European Championship success, the Liverpool manager, Rafael Benitez, was trying to sell him against his wishes to Juventus.

Alonso would have been on the way out had Juventus or Arsenal provided the £18m Benitez was looking for to finance Gareth Barry's purchase. His renaissance when it really counted this season – he was also outstanding in the defining win against Manchester United – has not been lost on Steven Gerrard, a sensitive individual for whom a summer like Alonso's would have been personally unbearable. "I must give a special mention for Alonso," Gerrard said recently. "He had a very difficult time just before the transfer window shut, and didn't know if he was coming or going."

When you're looking for an idea of how much character an individual possesses, there is no better reference point than Carragher. His autobiography is a searing critique of the Benitez era and his judgement of Alonso within it a revealing one. Carragher brackets the central midfielder as one of those players who show "the hunger I relate to, embracing the culture and mental-

ty of the supporters," his passing providing "the guile alongside Gerrard which we'd been lacking".

Though Liverpool's willingness to part company with the playmaker seemed to have affected his relationship with his compatriot Benitez irrevocably – Alonso recently told *Gazzetta dello Sport* that "for my part, the attraction [of Juventus] has remained intact" – playing a part in restoring the championship to Anfield after an 18-year wait would presumably change everything. He was certainly rolling up his sleeves at the prospect yesterday. "The three points against Chelsea are as important as the three points against Wigan and the three that are available against Portsmouth on Wednesday – they are all of the same value," he said. "When everyone works really hard for one another you have a chance to beat anyone. It was really important to score first as well because it would have been very difficult to come back in a game like this one. Now we have to think about Wednesday and remain really calm. We are professionals and we are conscious that there is still a long way to go."

Statistics certainly bear him out on the last part. Though Liverpool have never enjoyed a better start to a Premier League campaign, they are acquainted with being top at this time of a Premier League season and watching everything fall apart thereafter. Gerard Houllier's side led for a month in October 2002 after Salif Diao's winner at Leeds (neither Carragher nor Gerrard spared his sensitivities in their autobiographies), only to finish the season fifth and 19 points off the top, having failed to win in 11 matches after 9 November. They were also top in September last year before imploding.

On neither of those occasions had Liverpool enjoyed the psychological benefits of having beaten the two sides who, by a huge distance, are title favourites. Neither were their sides so settled. One of the many problems they have ironed out is that obstinate one of who to play down the left wing, with Albert Riera's display in that position at Stamford Bridge providing more evidence that he is the answer. The Liverpool fans who chanted Alonso's

name against Lazio pre-season, when it looked like he was leaving, will tell you that Liverpool wouldn't have Riera either had Alonso left and freed the cash for Barry instead.

Steven Gerrard served a reminder that Liverpool had achieved nothing yet. "To win this league and become champions you have to handle the pressure of being at the top," he said. "That's the challenge now."

Alonso is acutely aware of the effect of beating both Manchester United and Chelsea, even though Liverpool's

talisman Fernando Torres may be missing at White Hart Lane this weekend. "[Sunday] was very important for us because in the last few seasons in the league we have been [to Chelsea] and we haven't had the best results," he said.

For Benitez, the defensive effort – in particular Sami Hyypia's – will have been the most comforting part of Chelsea's first defeat at home in the league since Arsenal beat them 2-1 in February 2004. But don't be surprised if this proves Liverpool's weakness. Andrea Dossena has looked out of his depth from the moment he strode on to a pitch at Liège in August and Alvaro Arbeloa is another Benitez full-back who often finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. When Hyypia plays, the 34-year-old lacks pace for those sides who will run at him.

But Benitez's immediate challenge is to keep a lid on expectations. His side have a run of fixtures – Spurs, Bolton, Fulham, West Ham and Blackburn – which should enable them to maintain their presence at the top, though it risks confounding Benitez's attempts to be the "invisible" team who sneak through as contenders while no one is looking. "It must be one game at a time," said Alonso, the voice of experience Benitez so nearly didn't have to call on.

