



# Late reprieve cannot hide the gaping holes in Benítez's team

Liverpool must prove they have strength in depth to sustain their challenge

**M**uch has changed about Liverpool this season but the rallying call that followed their first defeat of the campaign at White Hart Lane on Saturday was all-too familiar. Jamie Carragher and Steven Gerrard, as always, led the call-to-arms to demand that Atlético Madrid were met with a show of character comparable to Chelsea and Manchester United, and one worthy of a side now being considered in title terms. But it was never about character for Liverpool last night. It was a question of quality, and its absence in too many areas will trouble Rafael Benítez regardless of the reprieve they were gifted by referee Martin Hansson last night.

If there is one aspect of their game Liverpool do not have to prove it is spirit, the indefatigable belief that has rescued Benítez's team at the very pinnacle of the Champions League competition and has been evident throughout this season's rise to the Premier League summit. What they have still to prove, despite several high-profile scalps and impressive comebacks this term, is the strength in depth required to sustain their unques-

tioned ability of their first team and the aspirations of their supporters.

As David N'Gog replaced £20.3m Robbie Keane with Liverpool in desperate search of an equaliser against Atlético, with Fernando Torres squirming in the stands with every miss against his boyhood club, and as the Spaniards targeted their hosts' problems at full-back at every opportunity, the question was brought to the fore. It remained there despite Hansson's ludicrous penalty award that allowed Gerrard to equalise in the dying seconds.

Ending Chelsea's 86-game record at Stamford Bridge, a month after beating Manchester United for the first time in the league under Benítez, removed any insecurities that lingered in Liverpool against the teams they must overcome to claim a first title since 1990. The relative weakness of their full-backs compared to United and especially Chelsea, however, remains a problem for the Liverpool manager.

Alvaro Arbeloa has certainly improved on his alarming start to the season but his appearance

record - starting every game bar the Carling Cup third round win over Crewe - owes more to the lack of alternatives available to Benítez than the quality of the defender signed from Deportivo La Coruna. The manager has already talked of resting the defender after this game. Arbeloa's distribution against Atlético, or the consistent lack of it, drove the Anfield faithful to distraction and there were even calls for Philipp Degen to be brought off the bench here, despite the Swiss international having made only one appearance in an injury-plagued first season for Liverpool.

In fairness to Degen he at least arrived at Anfield on a free transfer and with a track record of fitness problems from his time at Borussia Dortmund. His fellow full-back signing of the summer, Italian international Andrea Dossena, cost £7m from Udinese and has had only marginally more impact than the lesser-spotted Swiss. A revolving door policy has been employed for Liverpool's left back position this season, Dossena appearing one moment, Fabio Aurelio the next, and neither has appeared capable of holding on securely. Where-

as Luis Felipe Scolari can call on the experienced Wayne Bridge whenever Ashley Cole is sidelined at Chelsea, Benítez is currently reliant on a new arrival struggling to acclimatise to the English game or a Brazilian whose injury problems regularly deny him a consistent run in the side.

Aurelio was preferred against the Spaniards last night and succeeded only in highlighting the continued flaws in his department.

Though more reliable than Dossena, Aurelio's adventure can occasionally prove his team's undoing. As was the case against Atlético. Having pursued Maxi Rodríguez into the Spanish half the Liverpool left-back failed to track the visiting captain's run towards Jose Reina's goal. He also left the space from where Antonio López crossed, and was nowhere to be seen as Rodríguez glided beyond Jamie Carragher to finish low into the far corner.

Keane's latest subdued display as a lone striker was another concern to Anfield and his fortunes were encapsulated when he gave way to the inexperienced French youngster N'Gog.



## Keane needs return of Torres to help recover Liverpool goal threat

Robbie Keane's Liverpool career, in truth, hasn't really got started yet, the first few months conspiring to make progress fairly difficult.

**F**irst there was the issue of building an understanding with Fernando Torres while the team took time to find their feet.

Then came the problems with rhythm courtesy of the international breaks. Stop, start, stop, start. It doesn't help anyone, least of all a player desperate to find his form at the club he supported as a boy.

Just when Keane and Torres were beginning to hit it off, combining in the way we all thought they could, the Spaniard gets injured, missing the last five games, including Tuesday night's Champions League encounter with Atleti-

co Madrid. As a result, Rafa Benítez asked Keane to lead the line on his own, a role not ideally suited to this ingenious playmaker.

The Irishman, for a start, naturally likes to drop off to find promising pockets of space, a route largely denied him as the lone forward.

In this system, Benítez wanted him occupying the two centre-halves, working the channels, so creating room behind for the likes of Steven Gerrard and Dirk Kuyt. On another day it might have worked but Keane's Liverpool side on Tuesday came up against opponents

who defended with purpose and a great deal of discipline. There was hardly room to breathe in the final third, thanks partly to the conscientious efforts of Atletico anchorman, Paulo Assuncao.

On the one occasion Keane did escape the backline, timing his run perfectly to avoid the offside flag, he couldn't quite manage to complete the final part, Atletico's goalkeeper, Leo Franco, pinching the ball off the front man's toe as he tried to skip round him.

It was a moment that starkly highlighted the difference between Keane in a Tottenham shirt last season and Keane

wearing the Liver bird on his chest these past few weeks. There have been times to cheer, of course, such as when he got off the mark with a cute flick against PSV Eindhoven and when he set up Torres for a goal in the Merseyside derby.

For someone of Keane's ability, however, there haven't been nearly enough thus far. You can see the frustration in his every move.

It didn't help here that Keane lacks the kind of searing pace ideally needed for the role, the kind possessed by Torres who can leave defenders in his wake. Furthermore, Keane loves to link up with

another striker, using his vision and cute passing range to build an understanding. At no time in his career has that fact been better illustrated than at White Hart Lane where Dimitar Berbatov provided an almost perfect sidekick. On the same wavelength, they made sweet music together.

No such suggestion of that here, though, mainly because Torres was watching anxiously from up in the stand, twitching nervously in his seat as chances went begging. Even so, Keane must have been surprised to see his number go up, to be replaced by David

N'Gog, a young player with very little experience.

So as Keane gets over the disappointment this morning of being withdrawn from a game in which Liverpool were eager to score, he must be fervently hoping that Torres returns on Saturday to face West Bromwich.

It's about time, after all, that the pair starting working properly in tandem. It's about time that Keane's Liverpool career got started for real.

When that happens, a team with Premier League title ambitions will start to look even more threatening.

