

Martin O'Neill must learn the lessons from Carling Cup defeat



Aston Villa are right to feel aggrieved after their controversial Carling Cup final defeat to Manchester United.

But the furore over referee Phil Dowd's decision not to send off Nemanja Vidic when he conceded an early penalty for fouling Gabriel Agbonlahor should not detract from issues Villa boss Martin O'Neill must surely address if his side is to be successful this term.

I firmly believe if Vidic had got his marching orders then Villa would have gone on to

lift the trophy - O'Neill's first silverware at the club.

I imagine the pace of Agbonlahor, Stewart Downing and Ashley Young would have exploited their numerical advantage on a big Wembley pitch, ensuring a Villa victory.

But as it was, after a bright opening, I was disappointed with Villa's display and was somewhat surprised by O'Neill's remarks afterwards that he was absolutely delighted with his team.

Now not for one millisecond do I think I could do a better job as a manager than O'Neill.

But there appear to be a number of questions about the Villa performance that many fans were grumbling about after their Wembley day out.

For starters, I was amazed it took until the 80th minute to bring on John Carew for Emile Heskey.

I imagine O'Neill was reluctant to put Carew on any sooner, with extra-time a possibility, given his lack of action since returning from injury.

But Carew gave an interview last week after scoring two goals in the FA Cup replay win over Crystal Palace saying how he was feeling fully fit again.

And I felt Villa were crying out for the Norwegian's introduction at Wembley long before O'Neill's side fell behind in the 74th minute to Wayne Rooney's header.

I gave Heskey a six in our match ratings.

But on reflection I think a four might have been more appropriate, and certainly the striker's display had Villa supporters near the press box groaning.

I know Heskey has a become an easy target for the moaners and would have looked dangerous if perhaps Downing or Young's final ball had been better.

But the striker, signed from Wigan last January, never looked like adding to his paltry goal haul this season.

And I don't think his presence particularly worried Vidic or Jonny Evans in United's defence.

So I will be very interested to see who O'Neill selects up front alongside Agbonlahor on Sunday at Reading in Villa's FA Cup quarter-final.

I personally would go for Carew and Agbonlahor together in attack almost every time.

But it has long been suggested in the Villa dressing room that O'Neill has his favourites

and nowhere is that more evident than with Stiliyan Petrov.

With the Bulgarian midfielder struggling recently with a virus and an Achilles injury, I was surprised O'Neill didn't sub him for the energetic Steve Sidwell against United to pep up Villa late on.

But O'Neill seemed strangely reluctant to make any changes when the game was slipping away from Villa, which perhaps illustrates a lack of faith in his squad members.

Richard Dunne and James Collins have performed superbly as a unit in the centre of defence this season.

But Dunne messed up for Michael Owen's opener, and Collins lost Rooney for United's winner.

It was ironic after Dunne's pre-match interview about Villa's fine defence, and perhaps there is some complacency creeping into O'Neill's first choice XI as he seems so loyal to them.

Now, with fit-again England hopeful Curtis Davies kicking his heels on the sidelines, I don't think it would hurt either centre-back to be dropped.

And certainly Luke Young has proved a more than capable full-back and must be unhappy at being sat on the bench as centre-back Carlos Cuellar played right-back at Wembley.

Cuellar has had a fine season in defence, where he has played most positions across the back four, but I can't understand O'Neill's determination to play him at right-back.

The Spaniard's distribution is simply not good enough when tight to the touchline and his crossing leaves a lot to be desired as he showed at Wembley when he thumped one ball straight out behind the goal.

Again, it had the Villa fans near me groaning.

So O'Neill must have a lot to ponder as he assesses Villa's display at Wembley - and I am not just talking about Dowd's decision.

Javier Mascherano to seek Liverpool assurances before signing deal

Javier Mascherano will seek reassurances over Liverpool's plans to strengthen manager Rafael Benitez's squad before agreeing to turn his back on a potential move to Barcelona and extend his contract at Anfield for a further two years.

Liverpool have approached Mascherano's representatives with a view to offering the Argentine international captain improved terms on his current deal, which expires in 2012, and the two parties are expected to meet on Merseyside early next week.

Barcelona were widely expected to return with a firm bid for the player this summer after initial enquiries from the European champions' sporting director Txiki Begiristain were rejected outright by the Anfield club last year, but Liverpool are confident a deal worth around £100,000-a-week

will be enough to retain the midfielder's services.

The club will have to convince him, though, that owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett have the resources to equip Benitez with a side capable of maintaining their Champions League status and challenging for the Premier League title after a campaign tinged with desperate disappointment.

"Liverpool have approached us to discuss a new contract and my agent will have a meeting in the next few days," said Mascherano. "The reality is that I am very happy at Liverpool. I want to know what the club's plans

are and then we will see if, at this moment in time, I can renew my contract.

"It is not that I felt unsettled [by the rumours of Barcelona's interest] in the summer or that I am more at home now. I have always been very happy at Liverpool. Everyone at the club has always treated me very well. That is all there is to say at this stage."

Liverpool are also thought to be close on sealing a new, five-year contract for the Spanish international goalkeeper Pepe Reina as Benitez looks to secure the futures of all of his most valuable assets.

