

Liverpool can find reason to believe even amid the despair

Optimism is in short supply at Anfield these days. Liverpool started the season regarded as Premier League title challengers, but find themselves stranded in seventh place, some eight points behind Tottenham Hotspur with just four games left to play. Fernando Torres, the club's talisman, underwent his second knee operation in just four months yesterday evening, and will not play again this campaign. In his absence, the chances of Rafael Benitez rescuing some reward from a season of unalloyed despair have all but dwindled into dust.

The manager's future, too, remains uncertain, though to some that is reason for cheer. Juventus reportedly want the Spaniard to rule himself in or out of the running as a candidate for their soon-to-be-vacant hot-seat by the end of this week. It has been suggested that all of the transfer riches of the Agnelli family wait for him in Turin, the sort of offer Liverpool, up for sale, simply cannot make.

Martin Broughton, the club's new chairman and the man tasked with hawking England's most successful side around the world, may have assured fans that no fire-sale will be needed, that there will be funds to spend in the summer, but Benitez is used to wheeling and dealing, bartering and bargaining at Anfield. There is little prospect of that changing until Tom Hicks and George Gillett, the club's owners, find their replacements.

Liverpool are treading water while Tottenham, Manchester City and Aston Villa stream past them. Everton are catching up, too, their form in the latter half of the season a menacing reminder that there are eight teams in the Premier League who have their eyes on Europe. Arsenal, though unpredictable, have the money they need to bolster their resources, should Arsene Wenger choose to spend it. Manchester United and Chelsea are off in the distance. No wonder Anfield is so down in the mouth. If you stand still, you fall be-

hind.

There is a received wisdom, an accepted truth, that has it that Liverpool's season has been so poor that they are, for the near future, finished as a force. Last season's achievement, finishing second with a record points haul for that position, has been written off as a blip, as though the troubles of this campaign are the norm. Yet that equation could easily be reversed.

Liverpool, even without money, even without stability, whoever is manager, may fulfil Jamie Carragher's words of warning, uttered in the aftermath of the draw with Birmingham which effectively ended their Champions League hopes. "People are saying that if we don't get there, that'll be us. As though we'll never get there again. That's nonsense." Liverpool, Carragher admits, may be down. A club that size, though, can never be out.

His confidence seems baffling, given their travails. But, just as it must confuse Carragher quite why his side are struggling so badly when he looks at those around him in training, so it must give him belief that there is hope. He can look at Pepe Reina, arguably the best goalkeeper in the world and certainly the best in England. He can look at Glen Johnson, England's right back. He can look at Javier Mascherano, the best defensive midfielder in Europe, and at his international team-mate, Maxi Rodriguez, starting to find his feet. And he can look at Steven Gerrard and Torres, not to mention the likes of Daniel Agger, Yossi Benayoun and even Dirk Kuyt, occasionally.

That spine is not that of a seventh-placed side. There is a refrain which echoes around Anfield every August, a sense that this year, finally, will be Liverpool's year. It has not been for more than two decades, of course. Next year, in all probability, will not Liverpool's year either. But there is no reason to believe it will be their doomsday, either.



GERRARD