

LIVERPOOL CREATE CUP HISTORY BUT LEAGUE GLORY REMAINS THE GOAL

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Liverpool recaptured some of the glory that used to be theirs as of right when they completed an unprecedented Cup treble last week. Dramatic victories in the FA Cup and UEFA Cup finals, added to their earlier triumph in the League (Worthington) Cup mean the Anfield trophy cabinet is groaning once again under the weight of polished silverware. Yet remarkable though these Cup exploits have been, Liverpool is a club whose global reputation was built around dominance of the old English First Division and European Cup.

For Gerard Houllier's impressively cohesive squad, therefore, the true measure of their greatness will be success in the Premiership and the Champions League. That's why everyone connected with the club viewed the week-end's final Premiership fixture away at Charlton Athletic as more important even than the two Cup Finals they had to negotiate during the preceding seven days.

Victory over Charlton would ensure that Liverpool finished the season in third place in the Premiership behind Manchester United and Arsenal, and so achieve pre-qualification for the Champions League next season. Liverpool and their fans are desperate to prove themselves on these bigger stages for two powerfully motivating reasons.

The first reason is their own pride, which has been dented for a decade following nearly twenty years when they were unquestionably England's and probably Europe's best club side.

The second reason is that the vacuum created by their fall from the pinnacle was swiftly filled by their arch-rivals, Manchester United. Nothing upsets the typical Liverpool supporter more than the spectacle of United's consistent achievements under Sir Alex Ferguson.

Now, however, their fans (and many neutrals) expect Liverpool to use their historic Cup treble as the springboard to consistent success in both the Premiership and the Champions League. There was certainly a sense last week that we were witnessing the start of a new era in Liverpool's history, and Houllier was swift to point this out. The confidence that comes from

breaking through the psychological barrier and becoming trophy-winners again will be a potent factor in Liverpool's approach next season.

Yet amid the euphoria it is worth examining once again how fine the line is between success and failure in football. Against Birmingham City (who last week lost their First Division play-off semi-final and so must endure a further season out of the Premiership) Liverpool struggled to find rhythm and conviction, and were fortunate to survive in open play before winning the lottery of a penalty shoot-out.

The boost that first trophy for six years must have given them was nowhere in evidence at Cardiff's magnificent Millennium Stadium last Saturday when Houllier's men faced Arsenal in the 120th FA Cup Final. Arsenal were almost embarrassingly dominant for 80 minutes of the sun-drenched showpiece, and looked certain to lift the Cup when Freddie Ljungberg finally put them ahead after they'd created, but spurned, numerous chances. Further guilt-edged opportunities to extend their lead were squandered before the phenomenally ruthless finishing of Michael Owen – assisted by Houllier's inspired substitutions – turned the match on its head.

Owen's two goals snatched the FA Cup from Arsenal's grasp and sent the Liverpool hordes into disbelieving raptures. It had been a largely colourless performance by the Reds, but Owen's late masterpiece enabled them to finish with a dazzling flourish. With confidence now soaring but minds still firmly focused on the task in hand, the Liverpool players – English, Scottish, Dutch, Finnish, German and Czech – set off for their date with destiny in Dortmund.

La Primera Liga's unfashionable Alaves from the Basque country awaited them, but Liverpool roared into a two-goal lead inside 16 minutes and completion of the third leg of the Cup treble seemed a mere formality. However, Alaves proved the worthiest of opponents, striking back with a superb goal and then mounting a period of sustained pressure that asked a host of awkward questions of Liverpool's normally solid defence. As the massed ranks of Merseysiders in the Westfalenstadion were becoming increasingly anxious, Alaves recklessly conceded a penalty which Gary McAllister coolly converted to give the Reds a 3-1 interval lead.

The start of the second-half proved every bit as explosive as the first, with Alaves creating two more brilliant goals to draw level. Yet when substitute Robbie Fowler's tremendous solo effort put Liverpool 4-3 ahead, the Basques had another mountain to climb. Astonishingly, they did so – Jordi Cruyff heading them back onto level terms a minute from the end of normal time.

Handicapped by the loss of two players in extra-time for second yellow cards offences, Alaves finally succumbed when McAllister's cunning free-kick flew into the net off the head of the unfortunate Delfi Geli. It was the golden own goal that won one of the truly great European finals – a thrilling, goal-laden match that had just about everything.

And so the current Liverpool squad achieved immortality by creating a piece of football history. For the 37-year-old McAllister – a free transfer signing from Coventry City last summer – it was a fairy tale ending to a remarkable season. Had the voting taken place a little later he would surely have won the Writers' and Players' Footballer of the year awards.

As for Houllier – whose team defeated Manchester United home and away in the Premiership campaign – this third Cup triumph was tangible proof that the bonding, mental toughness and thorough professionalism he has introduced to Anfield is working. For the fans, who are ready to elevate the French coach to the exalted status occupied by Liverpool legends Bill Shankly, Bob Paisley and Kenny Dalglish, the journey back to the promised land has begun.

Houllier himself is shrewd enough to know there are still deficiencies to be worked on before Liverpool can challenge Manchester United's supremacy over a 38-match Premiership campaign. But the self-belief they have acquired from an amazing week should give them the impetus to hit the ground running when next season gets underway.

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