

LIVERPOOL SEE CUP TREBLE AS LAUNCHPAD TO LEAGUE GLORY

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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 in the final week of the season. 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 League and the European Cup.

For Gerard Houllier's impressively cohesive squad, therefore, the true measure of their ability will be success in the Premiership and the Champions League. That's why Houllier had no hesitation in saying that last week-end's emphatic 4-0 win at Charlton Athletic was even more important than the two Cup Finals that immediately preceded it.

The win at The Valley confirmed Liverpool as third-place finishers in the Premiership behind Manchester United and Arsenal, and so ensured their qualification for next season's UEFA Champions League. It therefore kept alive the club's aim of mounting a twin-pronged assault on the Premiership and Champions League in 2001-02. Everyone connected with Liverpool is desperate to make a winning impact on these two biggest stages for two powerfully motivating reasons.

The first reason is pride. Liverpool's was 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 is harder for the typical Liverpool supporter to stomach than the spectacle of United's multiple achievements under Sir Alex Ferguson.

Now, however, their fans (and many neutrals) expect Liverpool to use this historic Cup treble as the launch-pad to consistent success in both the Premiership and the Champions League. As the 2000-01 season reached its

exciting conclusion, there was certainly a sense that we were witnessing the start of a new era in Liverpool's history.

The League Cup win in March, plus their first FA Cup triumph since 1992 and first on the European stage since 1984 meant that Liverpool finished the season with more trophies than they'd managed during the previous ten put together. Winning their first pieces of silverware has taken Houllier's squad over a major psychological barrier. The self-belief and confidence that this generates will be a potent factor in Liverpool's approach next season.

Yet amid the Anfield euphoria joyously expressed when the squad showed off the three trophies from an open-topped bus to 500,000 fans lining 17 miles of Liverpool city streets - it is worth examining once again how fine the line is between success and failure in football.

Against Birmingham City (who must endure a further season out of the Premiership after losing their First Division play-off semi-final) 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 when Houllier's men faced Arsenal in the 120th FA Cup Final, again at Cardiff's magnificent Millennium Stadium. Arsenal were almost embarrassingly dominant for 80 minutes of the sun-drenched showpiece, and looked certain to lift the Cup when Freddie Ljungberg put them ahead. But they created and spurned numerous chances to emphasise their superiority, and paid the price for such profligacy when 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. Despite recklessly conceding a penalty which Gary McAllister coolly converted to give the Reds a 3-1 interval lead, Alaves created two more brilliant goals to draw level early in the second-half.

Yet when substitute Robbie Fowler's solo effort put Liverpool 4-3 ahead, the Basques had to climb another mountain. Astonishingly, they did so Jordi Cruyff heading them back on level terms a minute from the end of normal time. Handicapped by the loss of two players in extra-time for second yellow card 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.

Yet even after achieving immortality by creating this piece of football history, the players could not afford to celebrate. They had another match to negotiate – one in which victory would mean more to the club (both financially and in terms of prestige) than winning the three cups had done.

Against Charlton they struggled for 45 minutes and might have been buried had their opponents had more luck in front of goal. But they regrouped at half-time and re-emerged much stronger and more purposeful. With two goals from Robbie Fowler, one from Danny Murphy and another clinical strike from Michael Owen, they swept Charlton aside and booked their place for next season in Europe's main event next season.

The standing ovation that Charlton's fans gave the Reds underlined Liverpool's growing appeal. In contrast to Manchester United, who are widely disliked within England, Liverpool have won admirers for their resilience under pressure, lack of arrogance and generally clean approach. The fact that they now supply an influential group of young players to the England team also helps.

As for Houllier – whose team defeated Manchester United home and away in the Premiership campaign – the bonding, mental toughness and thorough professionalism he has introduced to Anfield is clearly working. He is shrewd enough to know there are still some deficiencies to be worked on. But his team may now have the mental toughness and self-belief to challenge Manchester United's supremacy over a 38-match Premiership campaign. For Liverpool's fans, the journey back to the Promised Land has already begun.

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