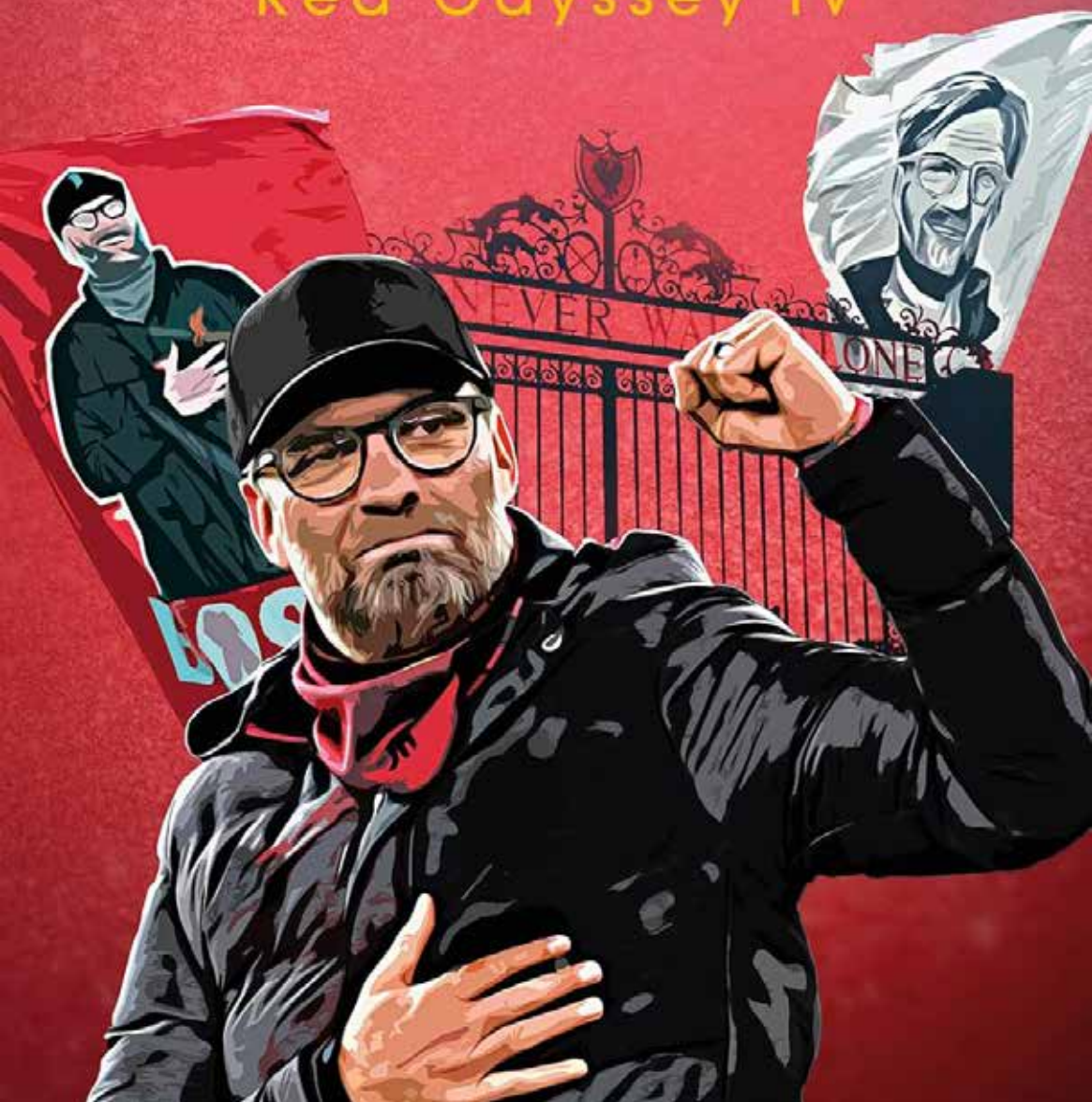


JEFF GOULDING



Klopp's Last Stand

Red Odyssey IV



Klopp's Last Stand

Red Odyssey IV

J E F F G O U L D I N G



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The Long Dark Season of the Soul

Liverpool FC August 2020–March 2021

The Summer After the Season Before

Reds' Title Hangover

The August sun envelops me as the heavy hum of a bumblebee graces my ear, my eyes blink open and I wince at the sunshine. At the back of my head a dull ache that signals dehydration gnaws at me and I reach for a can of cola on the patio table as a gentle breeze captures the red banner pinned to a fence panel behind me. It's a mere week or so since Liverpool secured their first league title in three decades, and in all the years since that last one in 1990, whenever I dreamed of how life would be when we eventually did it again, the reality was as far removed from the fantasy as it could be.

I'd envisaged various scenarios that ranged from me going on a drunken tour of the Home Counties, carrying a replica league trophy, and rubbing salt into the wounds of our bitterest rivals to, well, going on a drunken tour of European cities and celebrating with Liverpool supporters I met along the way. I'd dreamed of that title parade around the city streets and how the numbers gathered to greet the team and the trophy would have dwarfed anything that had gone before.

However, Covid-19 still stalked the land and lockdowns of varying degrees remained in place. Daily news conferences trotted out a depressing roll call of rising infections, and families ravaged by grief and loss struggled to make sense of the hurricane that had engulfed all our lives.

In football land, the same tribal insanity pervaded as rival supporters of all hues struggled to cope with the fact that Liverpool had actually won the league. Perhaps they'd stop singing their 'Gerrard song', I naively thought. That obviously assumed a degree of imagination and creativity these terrace wits simply didn't possess.

My social media feeds were full of faux outrage at a perceived overexuberance on the part of Liverpool supporters who had taken to the streets in jubilation in the aftermath of the club's historic achievement. It was during these celebrations at Liverpool's waterfront that some drunken idiot had launched a firework at the Liver Building, causing some minor damage.

It was a foolish and embarrassing affair for sure, but did it really justify the waves of memes discussing the cultural significance of the iconic landmark and how this act of generational vandalism was

evidence of a lumpen tendency unique to Liverpool supporters? Or was it more like a symptom of youthful irresponsibility fuelled by beer, months of enforced isolation and the kind of elan that only a communal sporting triumph can evoke?

Likewise, the wave of tutting and head shaking that accompanied the celebratory pyrotechnic displays that lit up the night skies above the city streets bordered on the melodramatic. Liverpool fans were, according to Evertonians at least, a threat to both our pets and our civic landmarks.

For my part, I'd steered clear of the party at the Pier Head and had simply donned a face mask and wandered down to the local shops to purchase as much 'Champions' tat as my money could buy. After gathering up enough T-shirts bearing Jürgen's grinning face to clothe me and the entire family, my attention turned to the array of cheap banners and flags on display. None of them were particularly good, to be honest, but I wanted one to hang in the garden and annoy any neighbours of a blue persuasion, so anything would do. Yes, I know if I were a proper supporter, I'd have made my own banner. I have no real argument here and can only offer mild depression and Covid malaise as a vague defence.

It's this banner that's now wafting in the summer air, as the kids enter the garden.

It's fair to say that I've never lived down the embarrassment of this banner, nor will I forget their mocking laughter as they first set eyes on it. As a middle-aged dad, I realise it's my duty to embarrass my children, and here it seems that I've succeeded with flying colours. Literally.

The flimsy piece of cloth is clearly mass-produced, and possibly by someone without the same keen eye for design possessed by the artists on the Kop. Emblazoned on a red background, in gold lettering, is the word 'Liverpool' above an image of the Premier League trophy. So far, so good. Then, underneath that, the words 'Champions of England'. So far, so good. However, from this point on it all falls apart.

The banner's design committee – and it's so bad it must have been designed by committee or even a mysterious algorithm – clearly wanted to create something truly poetic, before failing miserably and settling on the following prose:

WE SAY IT LOUD
WE ARE RED
AND WE ARE PROUD
FORM IS TEMPORARY
CLASS IS PERMANENT

I imagine that more than a few of you will have taken a short break from reading to stop laughing, and have now returned, composed and ready to resume. You may want to take another break. To make matters worse, the committee had opted to arrange the words either side of that image of the Premier League trophy. So, it could now be read as:

WE SAY IT LOUD FORM IS TEMPORARY
WE ARE RED CLASS IS
AND WE ARE PROUD PERMANENT

The suspension of football during Liverpool's championship-winning season had meant that the title wasn't secured until late in July, and that meant the FA Cup Final would take place on 1 August. Arsenal would beat Chelsea 2-1 in an empty Wembley, and strangely nobody refers to that game as the Covid final, there were no demands for it to be declared null and void and there were no calls for an asterisk to be engraved on the trophy. Strange that.

The ensuing summer break lasted just a few weeks, meaning there was no time for the usual meltdowns due to perceived transfer inactivity to evolve into all-out cyber wars. Liverpool would warm up for the season, in empty stadiums, of course, with friendly matches away to VfB Stuttgart, Red Bull Salzburg, and a 7-2 victory over Blackpool at Anfield.

Then, it was as if we all blinked and found ourselves in front of our TV screens watching a Community Shield tie contested by Liverpool and Arsenal in an echoing Wembley Stadium on 29 August.

A Takumi Minamino equaliser in the 73rd minute cancelled out a 12th-minute Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang opener, and the game finished 1-1. A penalty shoot-out followed and, sadly, it would be Liverpool's Rhian Brewster who would miss from the spot for the Reds, leaving Aubameyang to seal the contest for Arsenal.

I could have said, ‘It’s only the Community Shield, who cares?’ But I did care. I wanted us to win the game and I wanted Jürgen to lift that trophy too. I wanted to see him lift them all before he eventually departed Anfield, as an old man if it was up to me. Still, the defeat could do little to dampen the buzz of winning the league.

Liverpool were their usual sensible selves in the transfer window. With a net spend that reflected the economic realities of months without supporters through the turnstiles, and inability to truly cash in on our historic success. Mass job losses in the hospitality and travel industries would soon spread to other sectors and add to the gloom. Meanwhile, Manchester United’s Marcus Rashford was receiving criticism from sections of the right-wing media and politicians for – checks notes – campaigning to end child poverty. The National Health Service was creaking under the strain of a pandemic and millions would take to their doorsteps to applaud its workers on the 72nd anniversary of its creation.

The applause was an act of thanks and solidarity on behalf of a grateful public, and no doubt appreciated by those who had risked their lives during the viral outbreak. But the sight of grinning politicians clapping like performing seals in front of compliant TV cameras was a little galling. Decent PPE, a track and trace system that worked and a government who cared would have meant far more.

Liverpool said goodbye to a host of fringe players. Nathaniel Clyne, Pedro Chirivella, Adam Lallana, Andy Lonergan, Dejan Lovren, Ovie Ejaria, Ki-Jana Hoever and the unfortunate Rhian Brewster all headed through the exit door, raising an astonishing £51m. The money would partially fund moves for Kostas Tsimikas, Thiago Alcantara and Diogo Jota for a combined £84m.

We all craved a return to what used to pass for normalcy, but Covid’s grip was vice-like it seemed. News of vaccine trials and the lifting of restrictions would lift the spirits, only for us to see our hopes dashed by predictions of a second wave of infections as university and school students returned in September. Against this backdrop, the government introduced ‘eat out to help out’, and by ‘help out’ they, of course, meant the struggling hospitality sector and the wider economy.

Even by the standards of the period, this seemed crazy. But such was our desperation that many of us headed to our local restaurants

to get our 50 per cent discount and, for many of us, unwittingly spread the virus. We now know that public health officials were aghast at this measure, having argued it would lead to an uptick in infections.

In the middle of all this, the new football season resumed at Anfield on 12 September 2020. Liverpool opened the defence of their crown against newly promoted Leeds United. The scoreline makes it sound like a classic, a game for the ages. However, memories of watching the Reds behind closed doors from my armchair, with crowd sounds dubbed over the commentary, tell a different story.

This was football in 2020.

Liverpool 4-3 Leeds United

Chaotic Opener as Reds Edge New Boys at Anfield

For many the pandemic was a nightmare, and like all bad dreams it can take time to completely shake it off. You'll be going about your business and then you'll see something, catch an odour in your nostrils or hear a word or phrase that takes you right back to those days.

For me, to this day, sitting in the garden on a bright sunny afternoon can transport me back to lockdown. For my youngest daughter the very layout of her bedroom was a permanent reminder of sleepless nights full of worry, and we had to rearrange it. In reviewing my notes for this book, I decided to watch video of the game against Leeds United at Anfield on 12 September 2020, and it left me cold, but also thankful that I don't have to watch the football on my television accompanied by passionless commentary, empty stands and nothing but the echoing cries of the players to entertain me.

The experience was a painful reminder of what we missed. I read that the backdrop to this match included dire warnings from the government's scientific committee, SAGE, that the UK was 'on the edge of losing control' as recorded cases of Covid-19 exceeded 3,000 for the second day in a row. It now seems a fitting description of Liverpool's approach to the game. Imagine this game in a full stadium.

This was a night match, a 17.30 kick-off, so not quite floodlight territory. However, we can be certain that the place would have been rocking as supporters got ready to welcome the champions. The arrival of newly promoted Leeds United and the air of excited optimism

from fans crossing the Pennines to Anfield for the first time in 16 years would have added piquancy to the proceedings. Throw in a 4-3 scoreline and what we should be talking about here is a classic for the ages.

Rows of empty seats draped in banners representing supporters who watched remotely tells a different story. This was a sterile encounter, bereft of the pomp and majesty of a season opener at Anfield, and we watched on in confinement.

There was at least the promise of freedom. Around two weeks earlier, 275 miles away on the south coast, 2,500 supporters watched Brighton play out a pre-season friendly against Chelsea. This was the first time fans had entered a football ground since the Premier League retreated behind closed doors.

Despite the misery of being locked out of Anfield, there was still a sense of relief that football was back. I had no doubt that we'd eventually be allowed back into the ground, but my optimism had little to do with the government approach to handling the virus, nor did the ditching of the daily press briefings from Downing Street convince me that it had all gone away.

The source of my faith lay in the development of vaccines, and sure enough we were just months away from a rollout. While I was more than able to understand and to an extent even sympathise with the population's growing sense of mistrust in politicians and 'the establishment', whatever that had come to mean in 2020, I didn't and still don't have time for conspiracy theories around the emergence of the vaccine. Of course, I could be wrong, and Bill and Melinda Gates may well be sitting on their sofas as I write, each laden with buckets of popcorn as they study my every move, monitored via the chip in my arm. Somehow, though, I'm sure they have better things to do with their money and time.

As a healthcare worker I agreed with the experts who argued that our only way out of the crisis was a vaccine, and for me it couldn't come soon enough. I was also happy to wear a face mask. When I was later lambasted in a shop by a guy who was unfeasibly angry with me for wearing a surgical face mask, scolding me for the fact that I was unwittingly breathing in the 'toxic gas carbon dioxide', which he told me was 'far more dangerous than any virus', I couldn't help wondering

why surgeons and theatre teams hadn't been dropping like flies all these years.

Anyway, I digress. As I settled into my favourite 'lucky' seat on the couch, I cheered as Mohamed Salah became the first player to score on the opening day for the fourth time in a row. By the end of the game he would become the first in a Liverpool shirt to score a hat-trick in the first game of a league season since John Aldridge did so against Charlton during the 1988/89 campaign. His third would break Leeds' hearts, but before that they'd threaten to embarrass the champions.

Salah punished United defender Robin Koch, who handled the ball in the area just four minutes into the game. The Egyptian was flawless from the spot and the defending champions were off and running.

During the pandemic, Anfield hadn't been the fortress it once was. Without supporters in the stands, the players somehow became careless and lacked the ruthless edge that drove them to their first league title in 30 years, and the 18 they'd won before. Future football historians studying whether the fabled Anfield atmosphere is a myth or reality would do well to look at how the home team fared in the famous old stadium, with and without supporters.

Like many more after them, Leeds would find that going behind in L4 no longer held the same fear it once did. Just seven minutes after Salah put the Reds in front, Jack Harrison powered a right-foot shot past Alisson Becker to equalise for United.

Liverpool relied on poor defensive play by the visitors to retake the lead through Virgil van Dijk's header from an Andy Robertson corner on 20 minutes. However, our Dutch No.4 then gifted Patrick Bamford Leeds' second. This was all so uncharacteristic of a team who had ruthlessly marched to the title in the previous season.

A screamer from Salah restored my faith, albeit temporarily, in the 33rd minute, and the Reds ended the half in front. There had been a time when that would have been enough, and I could have relaxed during the interval, preparing myself for the inevitable rout to follow, as the Reds punished an away team for having the temerity to score not once but twice on our turf. Leeds had other ideas, however.

This was a game full of goals, literally packed with them. Four of them didn't stand but thankfully, of the seven that did, Liverpool

edged it. Before they could eventually deliver the coup de gras, though, Mateusz Klich drew his team level on 66 minutes. It was a strike that deserved the adulation missing from the away end. Klich's first touch was sublime, and the resultant volley beat Alisson all ends up. How he'd have loved to knee slide in front of his travelling admirers and milk their adulation. How many moments like that were players up and down the country robbed of?

Salah, whose goals would earn him the title of man of the match, had one last ace up his sleeve, though. A late tackle in the box by Rodrigo on Fabinho left his manager, Marcelo Bielsa, cursing on the touchline, and the Egyptian King ensured an uncomfortable trip home for the visitors with his third goal of the game, and his second from the spot.

Liverpool had secured the three points in the 88th minute. How we'd have celebrated that had we been in the ground. There's nothing like a late winner to have your heart hammering in your chest and send you home with a grin as wide as the mighty Mersey. I celebrated at home, of course, but it couldn't possibly compare.

Under Bielsa, United looked a decent side. Phil McNulty, writing for the BBC, had this to say: 'Leeds got on the ball, were bursting with energy and attacked Liverpool every time they had the chance, playing with confidence and self-belief.' It was the sort of form that would lead them to an impressive eighth-place finish on their return to the top flight.

Liverpool were uncharacteristically shaky at the back, with Van Dijk and Alexander-Arnold both probably grateful that the game was played behind closed doors. Liverpool's No.66 had headed into his own net before being rescued by the offside flag and our No.4, usually so 'calm as you like', was responsible for one of the visitors' goals.

As ever, though, Klopp could rely on one of the most potent attackers in world football, and Mohamed Salah had ridden to the rescue again, more than meriting his man-of-the-match title. For the Reds, this would extend an unbeaten home run to 60 games (W49 D11). As reported by the BBC, this was only the third run of 60-plus unbeaten home games by any top-flight team in English football. The other two were Chelsea with a run of 86 ending in October 2008 and Liverpool's run of 63 ending in December 1980.

However, as the 2020/21 season progressed, fortress Anfield would experience its sternest test ever, and the absence of supporters would take its toll on the Reds' ambitions of retaining their crown.

Chelsea 0-2 Liverpool

Kepa Nightmare as Sadio Mané Demolishes Chelsea at Stamford Bridge

Just eight days later, on 20 September, Liverpool headed to Stamford Bridge to face Frank Lampard's Chelsea. As we now know, Frank had earned himself legendary status among Evertonians by – checks notes – shouting at Jürgen Klopp during a 5-3 defeat to Liverpool, who were about to lift the Premier League trophy at Anfield. The former Chelsea midfielder would, of course, go on to manage our neighbours across Stanley Park, adding saving them from relegation to his CV, but in the autumn of 2020 he still had fantasies that involved the top end of the table.

Refereeing the game was Paul Tierney, a man who would later achieve pantomime villain status at Anfield. However, he proved that even a referee can get things right occasionally, and only at the second time of asking. After initially awarding a yellow for an Andreas Christensen lunge on Sadio Mané, who had raced on to a Jordan Henderson pass, Klopp's future nemesis eventually delivered Liverpool an advantage by serving the Chelsea player with a red card on the stroke of half-time.

In truth, though, this was a comfortable win for the Reds, with Mané in imperious form, Alisson resolute in the Reds' goalmouth and Chelsea porous in defence. Mané grabbed a brace in the game, becoming the third Liverpool player to do so at Stamford Bridge after Steve McManaman in 1995 and Philippe Coutinho in 2015. Alisson, meanwhile, saved a penalty, denying Chelsea an unlikely route back into the game, keeping out Jorginho's effort from the spot.

However, his opposite number, Kepa Arrizabalaga, had a calamitous game. Within five minutes of the restart Mané put Liverpool in front following an assist from Bobby Firmino. Then, just four minutes later, the game was won when the man for whom Chelsea had stumped up £71m, a record fee for a keeper, attempted a clearance that Laurel and Hardy would have been proud of, failing

dismally to deal with a Firmino cross and handing Sadio the simplest of headed goals.

The second half started with a debut appearance by Thiago Alcantara, on for the injured Henderson. The Spaniard is a sumptuous footballer whose capture from Bayern Munich for a mere £20m plus add-ons had excited us all; however, a clumsy challenge on Timo Werner in the Reds' penalty area gifted the Londoners a possible way back.

The sight of Jorginho with the ball in his hands felt ominous. Usually consummate from 12 yards, the Brazilian saw his effort saved by Alisson. Although there was still 15 minutes to play, Liverpool were home and dry.

Despite the home side being down to ten men for the whole of the second half, the media and Jürgen Klopp were in no doubt as to Liverpool's dominance. Jürgen hailed the result as perfect, and both the print and broadcast media were unanimous in declaring that Liverpool were back to their old selves. The perspective of time shows that they were all premature in their judgement, but this was a comfortable win for the Reds in the capital.

For the Blues, the performance of their 'star keeper' would convince them to pursue a little-known goalkeeper plying his trade at French outfit Rennes. Édouard Mendy and Kepa Arrizabalaga would trade places in the Chelsea goal in the seasons to come, most notably, and with disastrous consequences, in the 2022 League Cup Final. We'll come to that later.

Speaking to BBC's *Match of the Day*, Chelsea boss Lampard clutched at straws, saying, 'For chances the first half was very even. The red card changes the face of the game, the talk I do at half-time, and it forces me into a reshuffle. It was always going to be difficult after that.'

Surprisingly, Klopp agreed that the red card had been significant, telling BBC Sport:

It's always a tough game here. I liked the first half. It was two teams that wanted to play, create, defend and make things happen. They were the dominant side without goals but then a massive game-changer in the last seconds, which was good for us. We had to adapt to that, and we did.

Generous? Maybe, but a win at Stamford Bridge has always been satisfying regardless of how it arrives. It was now six points from two games, and with a trip to Lincoln City and Sincil Bank in the third round of the League Cup to come, few would have bet against the champions having another memorable campaign. It would be, of course, but not for the reasons we expected.

Lincoln City 2-7 Liverpool

Three Debuts and a Curtis Jones-Inspired Rout

We've reached 24 September and, with the national news continuing to be dominated by the pandemic, Liverpool travelled to Sincil Bank to face Lincoln City in the third round of the Football League Cup. Children had returned to our schools, we were working from home and the UK had just posted the largest daily number of Covid infections since mass testing began.

Meanwhile, a group calling themselves Extinction Rebellion had blockaded printing presses, preventing the publication of several national newspapers as part of their ongoing campaign to wake up a species seemingly sleepwalking towards oblivion. These were crazy times, and it was hard not to feel apocalyptic about the future. Thankfully football rumbled on, albeit still a pale imitation of its former self.

The game against Lincoln was packed with debuts. We've come to realise in the years since just how many young players owe their careers to Liverpool's academy, first and foremost, but also to Jürgen Klopp for having the courage and belief to give them their start in football. In an age in which supporters demand instant success, where our rivals are spending the GDP of small countries to monopolise the sport, it takes great bravery for a coach to put his faith in youngsters. One of those is, of course, Curtis Jones, a player who divides opinion at times and who Jürgen seems to treat as a favourite son, sometimes praising the youngster and sometimes chastising him.

As the final whistle sounded at Sincil Bank, Klopp would be singling the Scouse prodigy out for the plaudits, describing Jones as an 'exceptional talent' and declaring that 'we will have some fun with him, I am pretty sure, in the future'. Of course, his brace of goals and man-of-the-match performance against the Imps was only part of the story.

In addition to Jones, debuts were also handed to Kostas Tsimikas, Diogo Jota and Rhys Williams, while Marko Grujić would grab his debut goal. Xherdan Shaqiri got the ball rolling with a sublime free kick with the game barely ten minutes old. Then, in a game packed with understudies, Takumi Minamino decided that he'd also seize his moment in the spotlight, dispatching a goal of similar quality into the top corner just nine minutes later.

With Lincoln starved of quality, Liverpool were threatening to serve up a footballing banquet, but it was now time to add a little local flavour. As the half-hour mark passed, Curtis Jones unleashed a quick-fire double, obliterating the Imps' dreams in four breathtaking minutes. The Scouser's first was a stunning long-range effort past a bedraggled Alex Palmer on 32 minutes, and he wasn't finished yet. Jones added to his tally with another piledriver from distance. It took a slight deflection but there was no doubting the quality of the strike, his fifth for the club. Jürgen Klopp agreed, stating, 'Both goals were difficult, for the second one the first touch was absolutely exceptional between two opponents and then he opens up and sees the opportunity and finishes it off.'

Liverpool went into the break with a four-goal lead, and for Lincoln it would be a case of damage limitation. Their manager's words would have been ringing in their ears after just 18 seconds of the restart, when Takumi Minamino doubled his tally, after pouncing on a loose ball after another Shakiri effort was saved.

Then in a blistering six-minute spell, Lincoln's Tayo Edun pulled one back on the hour mark, only for Marko Grujić to make it 6-1 after 65 minutes, before Lewis Montsma added a second for the home side. The Sincil Bank crowd were certainly getting their money's worth, and their heroes had given themselves a chance of winning the second half as their manager, Michael Appleton, had urged them to do.

Sadly for them, Divock Origi wasn't ready to surrender the limelight to his team-mates. The Belgian raced on to a Minamino through ball and made no mistake as he fired powerfully past Palmer to seal the tie with Liverpool's seventh. The reward would be a fourth-round tie with Arsenal.

Lincoln boss Michael Appleton tried his best to lift his players and their fans but had to concede that Liverpool had been on top

throughout: 'I thought in the first half we had our moments. It was a masterclass of finishing from Liverpool. In the second half we created a lot of opportunities. I felt sorry for the boys because the idea at half-time was to try to win the second half ... a simple message. We got punished by one or two errors. The difference in the first half was their finishing.'

Jürgen Klopp told BBC Radio 5 Live: 'We played a really good football game tonight. It was easy on the eye. We passed the ball and finished situations off. The boys wanted to play football and showed an exceptional attitude.'

Bigger tests lay ahead, but Liverpool's second string had proven they had the attitude and work ethic to do a job for their boss whenever he needed them. As we now know, he'd have to call on those reserves with increasing regularity as the season went on.

Liverpool 3-1 Arsenal

Gunners Outclassed as Jota Opens His Anfield Account

As we headed into the last week of opening month of the season, Liverpool appeared to be in reasonable shape. Manchester City had lost 5-2 at home to Leicester on Sunday, 27 September, and in a league in which the Reds had fallen short by a single point in 2019, that felt potentially significant.

For me, working in the health service, the pandemic had become genuinely all-consuming. It dominated both my home and professional life and I was becoming desperate for an escape. I loved and was immensely proud of my time in the NHS. I'd spent almost 30 years in public service, but the sense that my stint was coming to an end was inescapable.

I interviewed successfully for a position at a local university and faced a new challenge outside of the NHS with a heavy heart and a little apprehension. On the plus side, lockdown had given me the gift of time. When the working day was done, there was little else to occupy my whirling thoughts and, as it so often has, writing filled the void. As a result, I'd managed to publish two books in 2020. The first, *Champions Under Lockdown*, the third in this series, had arrived in August and would soon go to reprint. The second, *The Lost Shankly Boy*, written with George Scott, was published on 21 September.

I should have been excitedly looking forward to a new challenge in life, celebrating my success as an author and looking forward to another roller-coaster season with Klopp's Reds. Instead, it was hard to extract much joy or optimism from anything in what was shaping up to be – to paraphrase the late, great Douglas Adams – a long dark season of the soul. My family had suffered great trauma during lockdown. My wife, working on the front line, had to deal with the daily anxiety associated with the fear of becoming infected or passing on the virus to us. My kids had struggled greatly.

For my part, I'd tried to play a supporting role with varying degrees of success. Mostly I was hiding from it all, and hiding from my own feelings, escaping into work and writing but unable to escape a sense of guilt at not really being there for those around me. It was becoming ever harder to escape the realisation that I was drifting into depression. My lifestyle was becoming unhealthy, and stress felt all-pervasive, weighing heavily on my every waking moment. There seemed to be no release.

On Monday, 28 September Liverpool welcomed Arsenal to Anfield for the first of two games in the space of three days. On this day there were just three Premier League points at stake, but it would be a place in the fourth round of the League Cup up for grabs on the following Thursday. Such a situation would normally have provided that vital safety valve, allowing me to escape the pressure for at least a few hours, to mingle with friends before, during and after the games, and share life's burdens. That release was no longer available to me or anyone else.

Football, Shankly said in more innocent times, is much more important than life or death. Jürgen Klopp would describe it as the most important of the least important things in life. We can argue over the merits of these quotes, but both men were scrambling to explain how much the game means to many of us.

The league game against Arsenal on 28 September, played in front of a sea of empty seats, was at least one packed with incident. A goal for new signing Diogo Jota – who had become the 13th player in the Reds' history to notch on his debut – a rare strike for Andrew Robertson operating from the left-back position, and assisted by his right-back, Trent Alexander-Arnold, were just some of the highlights. And Sadio

Mané would ride his luck by escaping a red card after elbowing Kieran Tierney in the face.

Both teams went into the game having won their opening two matches, and it was Arsenal who took the lead through Alexandre Lacazette after just 25 minutes, following an error by Andy Robertson. Mané, who was probably lucky to still be on the pitch, grabbed Liverpool's equaliser just a few minutes later, pouncing on a weak clearance by Bernd Leno from a Mo Salah shot. Robertson then made amends for gifting the Gunners their lead by converting Alexander-Arnold's centre on 34 minutes.

Arsenal had a chance to level against the run of play, with the score at 2-1, but Lacazette's feeble effort when through on goal was easily saved by Alisson. Then, with the clock ticking down, Diogo Jota, making his Anfield debut, ended all doubts as to the outcome by grabbing Liverpool's third, and his first in a red shirt, to seal a 3-1 victory.

Mikel Arteta was magnanimous in defeat, telling BBC Sport after the game: 'They are superior to us in many aspects.'

Liverpool had coped well without new signing Thiago Alcantara and captain Jordan Henderson, both out with injury. We now know that Liverpool had bigger challenges ahead, some they'd fail to overcome. But for now the defence of the championship was looking healthy.

That may or may not have been true of their army of supporters watching from home, but for now it would have to do.

Seventeen Days in Hell

Champions Hit the Rocks

September had ended on a high for Liverpool, with the Reds riding high in the league and looking forward to another pivotal month. However, as Britain entered a rain-soaked October, the country continued to creak under a tiered lockdown system and the Reds' title defence was about to face its sternest test.

After dismissing the Gunners at Anfield, Liverpool faced Mikel Arteta's side for the second time in just a few days. As expected, the Spaniard had learned a thing or two from the humbling his side had faced in the league a few days earlier, and the Reds were frustrated by a more stubborn version of Arsenal and their keeper, Leno, this time

out. Klopp had chosen to make nine changes from the team that had recently beaten the Londoners so comfortably.

The game ended goalless after 90 minutes, and the Reds would once again have to try to settle a tie against the Londoners from the penalty spot. With memories of their shoot-out defeat in the Community Shield just weeks earlier no doubt fresh in the mind, Klopp's men once again failed to win the footballing equivalent of a lottery.

Adrián gave the Reds hope when he saved Mohamed Elneny's spot kick with Liverpool 3-2 up. However, the Gunners' goalkeeper, Bernd Leno, proved to be the hero of the day, saving two penalties, those of Divock Origi and Harry Wilson. That left it to Joe Willock to score the winning penalty and dump Klopp's men out of the cup.

This was the first clean sheet by an opposition goalkeeper in eight years, and there was no denying the frustration. The Reds had squandered numerous hard-earned chances created by the likes of Diogo Jota and Takumi Minamino.

Arsenal's reward would be a last-eight clash with Manchester City, in which they'd be well beaten. Meanwhile, for Liverpool it was a case of licking wounds and readying themselves for the next battle, away to Aston Villa.

Jürgen Klopp, ever the pragmatist, sounded philosophical when talking to Sky Sports: 'If there would have been a winner in 90 minutes, it should have been us, but we are not in dreamland, you have to score. I liked a lot of parts of the game, we mixed it up a lot and I saw a proper performance, a lot of things we like on the pitch when you wear this wonderful shirt. A penalty shoot-out is tricky, everyone knows. That is it.'

In truth, the boss probably wasn't too despondent at the prospect of exiting the competition. With injuries stacking up and a busy winter period not too far away, he'd have likely been relieved to see his fixture schedule lighten somewhat. For me, though, a win would have left us two games from Wembley and a chance to win another trophy. I was gutted.

If our exit from the League Cup had left me cold, just three days later an embarrassing drubbing at the hands of Aston Villa would plunge me into the deep freeze. Bad results happen in football. They always have. And the 7-2 mauling at Villa Park probably won't be the

last of its kind in the club's history. I'm old enough to remember Joe Fagan's treble-winning Reds get battered 4-0 away to Coventry City in that 1983/84 season.

Perhaps it was the context: mounting injuries, the misery of lockdown restrictions or the absence of key players, but for whatever reason the result at Villa Park felt like a hammer blow, a humbling we might struggle to recover from. And, although that may have been an overreaction, it did signal that Liverpool may not have what it takes to successfully defend their title.

The BBC's Emlyn Begley described it as a 'game that defies all logic', as Ollie Watkins (hat-trick) and future Manchester City substitute Jack Grealish (2) ran riot against a hapless Liverpool defence that, while missing Alisson Becker, boasted a title-winning back four. To make matters worse, Villa had narrowly escaped relegation only the season before. The BBC's hyperbole knew no bounds, describing it as 'one of the most unbelievable scorelines in Premier League history'. It hurt because it was probably true.

This was, after all, the first time the Reds had conceded seven since 1963. It was only the fourth time they'd tasted defeat in the Premier League since 3 January 2019. Not even two goals from Mohamed Salah could save them, a result and performance Villa manager Dean Smith couldn't have imagined in his most fevered dreams.

'We never dreamed of getting a result like this,' he gleefully told the media after the game. 'The performance was outstanding from start to finish. We created an awful lot of chances against an exceptional defence and team. We had to work very hard.'

Villa were at their best and deserved their victory, but it flattered Liverpool to claim they had to work hard to achieve it. The Reds were terrible and got deservedly hammered. The result also handed the army of football pundits a new narrative, that of Liverpool's high defensive line being exploited by the opposition.

There may have been some merit to this, as the Reds struggled initially to implement this new evolution. However, anyone downing drinks every time a former player uttered the phrase 'high line' would have been well sloshed in no time.

Klopp's men would eventually master it, of course, and score many goals as a result of winning possession higher up the pitch and catching

the opposition offside more than any other team in the process. Yet it never ceases to amaze me how these tropes gain traction and are repeated slavishly throughout an entire season. The endless droning on about zonal marking under Benítez is another example of this.

After the Villa rout, Jürgen Klopp was left to rue unforced errors, most notably from stand-in keeper Adrián, who had gifted Villa their first goal. He told BBC Sport:

You have to say that Villa did very well. They were very physical, very smart and very direct, we were not. We had big chances, which we did not use, but when you concede seven, I'm not sure you can say it would have been 7-7. We made too many mistakes and massive ones obviously. It started with the first goal and around the goals we made massive mistakes.

The result skewed Liverpool's goal difference to the extent that this was their worst league start in terms of goals conceded in the opening four matches since the 1937/38 season. Perhaps proving the adage about lies, damn lies and statistics, they'd actually won three of the four league games on offer. However, this result would deliver a psychological blow and meant that Liverpool dropped from second to fifth place as they went into what would be a powder-keg game against their neighbours, Everton, on 17 October 2020, at Goodison Park.

The game ended 2-2, a result celebrated on the blue half of the city like a win. For the Reds, though, it was a match that left us enraged. The scoreline was frankly only half the story in a game that saw the Reds lose their talismanic No.4 for the rest of the season after a horror tackle by Everton keeper Jordan Pickford. The fact that Everton's No.1 didn't see red for wiping out Van Dijk is remarkable enough, but Liverpool were also denied what was a clear penalty despite Stockley Park reviewing the incident multiple times. Another brutal foul on Thiago saw Richarlison red-carded, but this was only a fraction of the controversy.

Sadio Mané put Liverpool in front after only three minutes, but it was shortly after this that Pickford decided to take out Van Dijk with a wild tackle that wouldn't be out of place in a martial arts movie. Virgil hobbled off, replaced by Joe Gomez on 11 minutes. It would be Virgil's

last game of the season. The official explanation as to why Pickford wasn't immediately dismissed for such a reckless foul that clearly endangered an opponent is that VAR couldn't review it because of an earlier offside decision, an argument that only adds to the increasing absurdity of the system.

This was always going to be a tough game. Liverpool, still missing Alisson, and having suffered a damaging defeat at Villa days earlier, were facing an Everton side high on confidence. They'd won their previous seven games in all competitions under Carlo Ancelotti, with Dominic Calvert-Lewin scoring in their opening five. However, it was Michael Keane's header from a James Rodríguez corner that drew the Blues level after 19 minutes. That's the way it stayed until half-time.

Thiago was having one of his best games in a Liverpool shirt, and was running things for the Reds in midfield. In the second half it looked like the Reds were regaining some control over their nearest neighbours. Then, in the 72nd minute, a poor clearance by Yerry Mina was hammered in by Mohamed Salah. Liverpool looked back to their old selves and threatened to punish Everton further, only for Jordan Pickford to brilliantly and frustratingly save a Jöel Matip header.

It proved a significant moment for the Blues, as just minutes later Calvert-Lewin rose to head home an equaliser, in the 81st minute. Everton had miraculously managed to keep 11 men on the pitch up to now, thanks only to the vagaries of VAR, but the dismissal of Richarlison for a terrible tackle on Thiago in the 90th minute set up a frantic stoppage time.

The Reds looked to have won the game when Jordan Henderson smashed in a goal that would have broken the Blues' hearts and sent ours soaring, only for Stockley Park to once again ride to the rescue. The drawing of lines by video assistant referees is clearly more of an art than a science and, after a lengthy delay, they eventually found a part of Henderson's body offside, or was it Sadio Mané's? The media couldn't agree and the Professional Game Match Officials Limited (PGMOL) remained vague on the subject. It was, as Phil McNulty, writing for the BBC, said, 'A finish to match the chaotic nature of the game.'

Scrambling for positives and barely managing to hold down the lid on his simmering rage, Jürgen Klopp told *Match of the Day*, 'We were

dominant against a flying side.’ On the disallowed goal, he echoed how most people in football felt, stating, ‘I don’t know where the line is where you can do offside.’

We still don’t know, Jürgen. Liverpool had at least steadied the ship after a horror thrashing by Villa, but the loss of Thiago for an extended period and Van Dijk for the rest of the season would ultimately prove pivotal to the Reds’ title defence.

Anfield’s Walking Wounded Mount Recovery

The Reds Remain in Title Hunt

As has so often been the case throughout the post-Shankly era, Europe has provided hope and salvation to Liverpool. In good times and bad, the Reds have usually found a way to thrive in UEFA competition. We have an affinity with continental football that’s unrivalled in English football, and this association would once more bear fruit for us in the aftermath of that horrible October.

Klopp’s men followed up the calamities at Villa Park and Goodison with a 1-0 win over Ajax in the Amsterdam Arena, before November brought a 2-0 home win over FC Midtjylland, and a 5-0 thrashing of Atalanta put them on the brink of qualification for the knockout phase of the Champions League. The run in Europe also seemed to help Liverpool regain their footing in domestic competition. Victories over Sheffield United (2-1), West Ham (2-1) and a creditable 1-1 draw with Manchester City at the Etihad did much to lift the gloom.

Bizarrely, the victory over Sheffield United had seen Liverpool move level on points with league leaders Everton. Now that probably sounds incredible, especially given the Blues’ recent struggles. These were strange days indeed.

A similar scoreline against West Ham a week later put the Reds top, which somewhat masked the fact that they’d now conceded 27 goals in 14 games since becoming champions. There were ominous signs – for those who cared to see them – that Liverpool may not have what it takes to retain their title. I didn’t see them. Maybe I just didn’t want to.

Many would see the point won at City as a missed opportunity, especially given the fact that the Reds had taken the lead through a Mohamed Salah penalty after just 13 minutes. I was happy to take it,

especially as Kevin De Bruyne had squandered the chance to put City in front from the penalty spot.

Klopp, it seemed, was starting to see those ominous signs, and his frequent comments about the demands of a packed season were seized upon by pundits and rival fans alike as evidence of the German moaning and looking for excuses. Jürgen had been arguing for the introduction of a five substitutes rule for some time. This would allow managers to rotate players to a greater extent during games, easing the impact of fixture congestion. Of course, clubs with smaller squads would argue that this gave the 'big clubs' an unfair advantage. For his part, Pep Guardiola claimed that the failure of the Premier League to introduce the rule was a 'disaster'.

As if justifying the cases put forward by both men, the game against City saw Liverpool suffer another significant injury, with Trent Alexander-Arnold leaving the pitch late in the game with a calf injury. The Reds' already porous defence had been weakened still further.

When Liverpool lined up against Leicester City at Anfield on 22 November they did so minus the talents of Jordan Henderson, Virgil van Dijk, Trent Alexander-Arnold and Mohamed Salah (rested). That meant veteran James Milner as captain and Fabinho in the centre of defence. Still, looking at a front three of Firmino, Mané and Jota, I had enough confidence that the Reds could outscore their opponents. In the end Klopp's men would be perfect in both defence and attack, winning 3-0 and making a mockery of Brendan Rodgers's 100 per cent away record.

Diogo Jota became the first player in the club's history to score in his first four appearances at Anfield, adding to a Johnny Evans own goal and a Roberto Firmino strike. In doing so Jota helped send Liverpool back to the top of the table, joining Tottenham, who were the latest of the also-rans to fleetingly ascend to the summit.

Jürgen Klopp, speaking to Sky Sports, expressed his satisfaction with the Reds' performance:

We deserved it 100 per cent and the boys played an incredible game against a top, top opponent. Playing like we did tonight, I don't take this for granted. The boys were on fire, football-

wise, played and played and played. Jamie Vardy was much deeper than even last season, so that made it more tricky, as we had to bring Gini into possession as well. How the whole team defended from the front was incredible. We should've scored more goals, and that's a top sign for a good game.

Klopp's Liverpool were now undefeated in the league at Anfield since April 2017, an achievement that eclipsed a record set by Bob Paisley's Liverpool in the 70s and early 80s. The Reds were continuing to make a mockery of their injury crisis and defensive woes. And, where other managers would use such challenges as an excuse, Jürgen Klopp was finding ways to overcome them.

Crisis, what crisis?

Liverpool 4-0 Wolves

Emotion and Reverie as Supporters Trickle Back to the Terraces

With the final whistle blown and the players trudging towards the tunnel, having shown their appreciation to the supporters on the Kop, a grinning Jürgen Klopp made his way to that famous old terrace.

The sound of the applause grew, and shouts of approval filled the cold night air. We all knew what was coming, we'd waited so long to see it, and with great smiles on our faces we greeted each fist pump with a giant roar. The boss touched his hand to his heart and signalled his delight that this communion had finally returned.

It was the perfect end to a magical evening in L4, lit up by a few fine performances and, of course, four goals. However, it was our return to our spiritual home, Anfield, after so long away that would dominate our thoughts as we made our way home in the cold night air. No wonder that Klopp would describe the game as a 'goosebumps moment', and the sound of George Sephton playing the song 'Oh Happy Day' by Edwin Hawkins couldn't have been more pertinent.

This was, of course, Liverpool's first game in front of supporters since the Premier League went into lockdown several months earlier. It felt momentous and the first step on a long road back to normality. Whatever that means.

Yet earlier, with barely an hour to go before kick-off, Anfield's streets were a bleak affair, save for the flicker of Christmas lights

dancing in the windows of Skerries Road. The sight of Homebaked with its storefront shuttered and The Park pub standing silent and lonely on Walton Breck Road were dark reminders that this was no ordinary matchday.

On flagpole corner, where the Kop meets the Sir Kenny Dalglish Stand, a solitary stall selling scarves and badges had been erected, and in the faint glow of the turnstiles a small group of Kopites had assembled, clutching not their season tickets or fan cards but their mobile phones as they waited for stewards brandishing thermometers to carry out temperature checks. It was yet another reminder that, although we may have been climbing out of the Covid nightmare, we were merely at the foothills of our ascent.

The arrival of December had brought with it the country's first vaccines, and despite the shrieks of anti-vax protests and a wave of social media posts, memes and videos that mixed legitimate questions about the safety of this new inoculation with wild conspiracy theories that – as I've mentioned – sometimes involved Bill Gates and microchips, the vast majority of us rushed to be inoculated.

On the national scene the prime minister was expressing confidence in a home secretary facing allegations of bullying. Meanwhile, locally the news had been dominated by the arrest of the Liverpool mayor on charges of conspiracy to commit bribery and witness intimidation. Both denied the charges, of course.

As I wandered around the ground, taking in the old haunts, the Shankly statue, the Hillsborough Memorial and Anfield Road, before finally completing my circuit of the stadium, it was hard to escape the conclusion that society was a creaking wreck that could come crashing down around our ears at any moment. We were all hanging on for dear life, and against that backdrop it seemed strange that something as comparatively trivial as a football match could provide a degree of comfort and relief. Yet that's exactly how it felt.

I remembered those conversations in the Cabbage Hall pub, when the nagging voices at the back of our minds, telling us that our lives were about to change irrevocably, were at their loudest, and the only concern we had was whether a potential league title would be stolen from under our noses by a bloody virus. That was obviously naive, but it spoke to how important football had been then and still was.