Soccer Uefa Champions League

Liverpool's exit: what does it mean?

The draw with Basel has relegated Liverpool to the Europa League

Elimination will have both short- and long-term ramifications at Anfield

ANDY HUNTER

1 Brendan Rodgers is under renewed scrutiny

The feedback was clear and correct after Liverpool's miserable defeat at Crystal Palace on November 23rd: Fenway Sports Group, the club's owners, retained absolute faith in the man named the LMA Manager of the Year only six months previously, he was their appointment for the long term and Rodgers' position was not up for discussion.

The team has since gone five games without defeat but that tentative step forward offers no consolation the day after elimination from the group stage of the Champions League.

Rather than confirm Rodgers' optimistic claim that he has witnessed Champions League quality from Liverpool's players this season, the Basel performance raised more questions over their pedigree. And the manager's ability to inspire the appropriate reaction for a must-win game on the biggest stage.Rodgers's demeanour was downbeat at Monday's pre-match press conference and the lack of urgency, spirit and belief from his side – never mind their lack of quality – was alarming from the outset against the Swiss champions.

When a Liverpool team can only rouse itself for the closing moments of a game that has their Champions League status on the line, scrutiny leads back to the manager's door. The pressure will be immense on Rodgers should Liverpool be cut further adrift of fourth place after their next two Premier League games – away at Manchester United and home to Arsenal – or fail to reach the League Cup semi-final at the expense of Bournemouth next Wednesday.

2 The manager needs to instil clear direction in his team and quickly

Early in his Anfield reign Rodgers was asked if he would ever abandon his principles and revert to desperate, long-ball tactics to chase a result.

"If plan A doesn't work, plan B is to make a change to make plan A more effective," he replied. Anfield, where Jose Mourinho was once mocked for throwing John Terry up front for the final minutes of a Champions League semi-final, witnessed Martin Skrtel joining a Liverpool attack without a recognised striker for the closing stages against Basel.

There is nothing wrong with pragmatism – indeed, Rodgers tweaked his philosophy to the benefit of both Luis Suarez and Daniel Sturridge last season – but Liverpool were lost in a fog of their own making against Paulo Sousa's team. The manager's back-to-basics approach was necessary after the Palace defeat, steadying results and offering a platform for battered confidence to return gradually, but safety first was a confusing way to approach a must-win Champions League game.

It resulted in a team short on self-belief making an inhibited start and allowed Basel space to pass their way around Liverpool's deep central midfield. With only Raheem Sterling providing pace up front, the starting line-up showed Rodgers is still searching for a system suited to the different options at his disposal this season.

3 Doubt increases over Steven Gerrard's future at Anfield

Gerrard cut a despairing figure when the referee Bjorn Kuipers called time on Liverpool's brief and thoroughly underwhelming return to the Champions League on Tuesday. Only the Liverpool captain knows what was going through his mind as he dropped to the pitch and stared impassively into the middle distance, but the thought that this may prove his final Champions League appearance for his boyhood club would not have stretched the imagination.

Barring a Premier League transformation and top-four finish that appears beyond this group of players, it could be 2016-'17 before Gerrard might have a chance to return to the European elite with Liverpool. He would be 36 by then.

As always, the captain gave everything in pursuit of a Champions League reprieve and generated Liverpool's only hope with the 81st-minute equaliser against Basel. But it was not enough and Gerrard does not have enough quality around him to share responsibility.

4 The onus has increased on Liverpool's modest summer signings

Around £94 million (€120m) worth of signings started on the bench for Liverpool on Tuesday, providing another indication that the transfer market does not guarantee a solution to the problems confronting Rodgers. Even if there was the finance and intent to address several weaknesses in the January window – a goalkeeper and a defensive midfielder for a start – the loss of Champions League status, for this season and possibly beyond, does not enhance Liverpool's attractiveness in a difficult market.

Continued weakness in attack, with Rickie Lambert hauled off after 45 minutes against Basel and no striker on the bench as Rodgers overlooks the claims of Fabio Borini, increases the likelihood of Liverpool attempting to bring Divock Origi's arrival date from Lille forward to January.

Otherwise, answers must come from within. Daniel Sturridge is scheduled to be fit early next month but his fitness record is not encouraging.

5 Old Trafford will crave an opportunity for revenge

Liverpool not only strengthened their title prospects with a 3-0 win at Manchester United in March, but intensified the pressure on a beleaguered opposition manager and pushed their fierce rivals further out of the reckoning for Champions League qualification. How quickly fortunes fluctuate in football. United can return the compliment on Sunday.

Guardian Service

■ Brendan Rodgers: the Liverpool manager is under pressure since his summer transfer dealings has brought his side down to a mediocre level. PHOTOGRAPH: REUTERS

Gaelic Games

Rhode have forward drive to set record straight – Daly

Ian O'Riordan

Offaly champions know St Vincent's are formidable but they are ready for it

Leinster Club SFC final

Rhode (Offaly) v St Vincent's (Dublin)

Páirc Tailteann, Sunday, 2pm
TG4

It's not without some gentle irony that Rhode are looking to end their unique losing streak against the club looking to extend their unique winning streak. Because someone has to win and lose Sunday's Leinster club football final, unless it goes to a replay, and it could well be that both those streaks will actually continue.

Rhode have never won the Leinster title before, although the Offaly champions have lost all three of their finals, in 2006, 2008, and 2010 – the last two of those to then Dublin champions Kilmacud Crokes.

Standing in their way in Navan on Sunday are current Dublin champions St Vincent's, who now boast a perfect winning streak that stretches back to September 2012, including last year's Leinster title. If they win back-to-back titles on Sunday they'll surpass even the legendary St Vincent's team of the 1970s.

"Well I suppose no other club can say they've made four Leinster finals in the last eight years," says Rhode manager Pat Daly, which is one way of putting a positive spin on their relative consistency within the province, even if they've yet to actually win any of those finals.

"So at least seven or eight of the lads would have played in the final before. Of course that means we've probably eight or nine new lads in as well. But we've plenty of experienced lads in there, the likes of Niall, Conor and Alan McNamee, so certainly we're ready for it.

'Massive team'

"And we'd respect St Vincent's alright, a massive team, All-Ireland champions. But we'd have no fear, and the boys have said that themselves. They've been here before. Rhode are a good team, some of them have won eight county senior medals, five under-21s in a row. So they've no fear, because that's the way they are. If they're not good enough they're not good enough, but the lads have no fear."

Daly is speaking from experience too: a selector in 2006, he took over as manager last year, and even though Rhode were fairly well stunned in last year's county final by Tullamore, Daly never lost heart.

"Losing last year's final was a big shock, given we were 5-1 on. Having said that Tullamore were a very good side. We were short a few players as well. Not taking anything away from Tullamore.

"This year, after winning back the Offaly title, we were back training on the Tuesday night. The boys said that, they wanted to go straight back training, and that set the tone for the rest of the season."

Indeed it has, as Rhode have taken out both the Meath champions (Navan O'Mahony's) and Kildare champions, scoring 1-15 against Moorefield in the Leinster semi-final. Crucial to Sunday's game, however, is maintaining that scoring rate, as Rhode fell well short of it in their last three final appearances.

Attacking team

"In all those three finals, we scored eight scores, 1-7, 1-7 and 0-8," says Daly. "You won't win anything with that. If we score that again on Sunday we won't win it.

"We'd always be an attacking team. We don't set up defensively. We feel we have the forwards, so we'll be going at it that way. You have to go at it that way. Vincent's are also an attacking team, although they aren't long getting men behind the ball too. But our fitness is also very good. We've worked very hard on that this year."

"We'd always be an attacking team. We feel we have the forwards, so we'll be going at it that way. You have to go at it that way. Vincent's are also an attacking team

What Rhode also have in their favour is a very much in-form Niall McNamee: he hit 0-7 in the semi-final, and has the potential to outscore even the likes of Diarmuid Connolly on Sunday.

"I think Niall is one of the top 10 forwards in Ireland," says Daly. "He's a serious player. If we're training say at eight o'clock, Niall would be there half an hour before, popping balls over the bar. And he'd be the last man popping the ball over the bar that evening.

"He is very tuned in, very focused, and he brings it to a different level. He has always been that way. The first senior game he played for us he was only 17, and I think he got 3-6 from corner forward. You just knew then that this chap was something special."

Soccer Uefa Europa League

Adebayor absent from Spurs line-up due to family matter

Group C

Besiktas v Tottenham

Ataturk Olimpiyat Stadium, 6pm
ITV4, 3e

Mauricio Pochettino had no hesitation in granting Emmanuel Adebayor's request to return home to deal with a family matter.

As Tottenham's squad made their way to Turkey for Thursday's Europa League match with Besiktas, Spurs announced the striker would be absent because of a "private matter".

Pochettino confirmed on arriving at the Ataturk Olimpiyat Stadium that Adebayor had requested permission to return home to Togo, with reports suggesting a close relative of the striker had fallen ill.

Human

"When you have a problem, your mind is not quite . . . it is difficult to give your best," the manager said. "I have always told you that players are human. Many problems happen and it is important to fix this type of problem because always family is important.

"But we hope when he comes back he will be ready to start training and to help the team."

Adebayor has not played for Spurs since their 2-1 defeat at home to Stoke on November 9th, having been laid low by back and hamstring complaints as well as a virus.

He has struggled for form since Pochettino's arrival at White Hart Lane, scoring twice in 12 appearances.

■ Emmanuel Adebayor: reports suggest a close relative of the striker has fallen ill

While the 30-year-old misses the trip to Turkey, there could be a return to action for Kyle Walker. The right-back has not featured for Spurs since the first leg of the Europa League last-16 meeting with Benfica in March because of an abdominal problem that led to him missing out on England's World Cup squad and undergoing surgery in September.

Broken toe

Walker returned to training a month ago and could now make his first appearance in nine months against Besiktas.

Besiktas will be without their former Chelsea striker Demba Ba, who has a broken toe. His fellow attacker Mustafa Pektemek is also absent for Slaven Bilic's side.

Besiktas's progression to the knockout stages has already been secured but they will be going in search of the win.

"We've got a good form, we have got good results," the former West Ham and Everton defender Bilic said.

"We have before us a great team and a tough test awaits."

Guardian Service

Soccer Uefa Europa League

Deila confident Stokes will reject Cardiff City and stay at Parkhead

Group D

Dinamo Zagreb v Celtic

Stadion Maksimir, 6pm
BT Sport 1, Setanta Ireland

Celtic manager Ronny Deila was informed before he left Glasgow for Croatia that Republic of Ireland forward Anthony Stokes has been linked with Cardiff City but he "expects" the Dubliner to stay at Parkhead.

He said: "I heard it this morning. It is speculation again. I want everyone to stay. We have a good squad and Anthony has played well in the last weeks.

"I think he enjoys playing here. I expect him to stay."

Deila, meanwhile, claims his Celtic side are on an honour mission against Dinamo Zagreb in their final Group D game at the Stadion Maximir.

The Scottish champions are already through to the last 32 of the competition as runners-up to section winners Salzburg.

Captain Scott Brown did not travel with the squad as he is on a yellow card while winger James Forrest was also left behind to work on his fitness.

However, the Celtic manager insists he is not taking the game lightly and claims he cannot relax and enjoy what is, for the Parkhead club, a relatively pressure-free fixture.

■ Celtic's Republic of Ireland forward Anthony Stokes has been linked with Cardiff City

Speaking at Dinamo's ground before Celtic trained, Deila said: "I can't enjoy it because it is a new game and you want to win because you fight for honour in every game.

"It would be different if there was more pressure on us, it would be even harder if we had to win. But we want to have a good performance. I hate playing bad football games. So we have prepared as usual for this game.

"It is also an important match because if we get three points we have a better chance of being seeded next season in the Champions League, hopefully, and we also have an opportunity to develop ourselves."

Sights and sounds

The draw for the next two rounds of the tournament will be made next week.Deila is also hoping the draw will allow him to enjoy the sights and sounds of a full Celtic Park, something he has been unable to do since he took over from Neil Lennon in the summer.

"We want 60,000 at Celtic Park, that is our ambition," he said. "I hope we can play well until that game so everybody is really looking forward to it and we can play in a full stadium."

Europa League
Today's fixtures

Group A
Apollon Limassol v Villarreal (6.0)
Borussia M'gladbach v FC Zurich (6.0)
Group B
Club Brugge v HJK Helsinki (6.0)
FC Copenhagen v Torino (6.0)
Group C
Besiktas v Tottenham (6.0)
Partizan Belgrade v Asteras Tripoli (6.0)
Group D
Dinamo Zagreb v Celtic (6.0)
SV Salzburg v FC Astra Giurgiu (6.0)
Group E
PSV Eindhoven v Dinamo Moscow (6.0)
Panathinaikos v Estoril (6.0)
Group F
Dnipro v St Etienne (5.0)
FK Karabakh v Inter Milan (5.0)
Group G
Sevilla v Rijeka (8.05)
Standard Liege v Feyenoord (8.05)
Group H
Everton v Krasnodar (8.05)
Lille v Wolfsburg (8.05)
Group I
Napoli v Slovan Bratislava (8.05)
Young Boys v Sparta Prague (8.05)
Group J
Rio Ave v AaB Aaloorg (8.05)
Steaua Bucharest v Dynamo Kiev (8.05)
Group K
Fiorentina v Dinamo Minsk (8.05)
PAOK Salonika v Guingamp (8.05)
Group L
FC Metalist Kharkiv v Lokeren (8.05)
Legia Warsaw v Trabzonspor (8.05)

Soccer Uefa Europa League

Koné says return feels like debut all over again

Group H

Everton v Krasnodar

Goodison Park, 8.05
ITV4, Setanta Ireland

ANDY HUNTER

Arouna Koné has said it will feel akin to making his professional debut when he returns to the Everton attack after 14 months out injured.

The 31-year-old will start Everton's dead rubber against Krasnodar at Goodison Park having recovered from a serious knee ligament injury sustained in October 2013.

Koné has made only six appearances for Everton since following the manager, Roberto Martínez, from Wigan Athletic for £5 million and endured several setbacks in his attempt to return from injury, a process that involved cutting short his summer holiday to undergo a rehabilitation course in Belgium.

"It has been such a long wait that it feels like I am making my debut and starting the first game of my career all over again," said the Ivory Coast international, who has not scored in his brief Everton career. "I am so excited and really motivated to help the team after such a long time out.

"I've had two cruciate injuries before but this injury was more complicated. I never feared my career would be over but it has been tough and I've had to be patient."

With Everton assured of first place in Group H and the Russian club unable to progress, Martínez will make wholesale changes for the final group game.

The Everton manager confirmed Koné, the goalkeeper Joel Robles, Christian Atsu, Steven Pienaar, Bryan Oviedo, Tyias Browning and Luke Garbutt will start.

Gaelic Games Third Level

DCU face Jordanstown in Sigerson first round

EAMON DONOGHUE

This year's Sigerson Cup first round draw has pitted together 2012 champions DCU and star-studded University of Ulster Jordanstown.

DCU are in pursuit of a fourth title in ten years and include the likes of Laois defender Colm Begley, Galway's Tom Flynn, Dublin's Davy Byrne and Tipperary's Steven O'Brien in their team.

Five-time champions Jordanstown boast a team containing Mayo's Cillian O'Connor, Donegal's Paddy McBrearty, Cavan's Killian Clarke, Monaghan's Kieran Hughes and Tyrone attacker Ronan O'Neill.

In the competition's preliminary round in January, 41-year-old ex-Meath All-Ireland winner Graham Geraghty will represent IT Blanchardstown as they face NUIG.

Meanwhile reigning champions UCC will take on Cork IT in an all-Cork first round derby.

In the Fitzgibbon Cup the teams have again been separated into four groups for the opening rounds. Reigning champions Waterford IT are in a group with recently crowned league champions IT Carlow, NUI Maynooth and Mary Immaculate Limerick.

Reigning champions UCC host the football finals at the Mardyke while Limerick IT host the Fitzgibbon in their Moylish Campus with the final at the Gaelic Grounds.

Sigerson Cup
Preliminary round: NUI Galway v IT Blanchardstown; Athlone IT v Trinity College.
First round: UCC v Cork IT; IT Sligo v Queen's University; UL v NUI Maynooth; IT Carlow v IT Tralee; UCD v Athlone IT/Trinity College; Dublin IT v GMIT; St Mary's v NUI Galway/IT Blanchardstown; Jordanstown v DCU.
Fitzgibbon Cup
Group 1: DCU, Cork IT, UCD, St Pat's
Group 2: UCC, GMIT, NUI Galway, UL
Group 3: IT Carlow, Waterford IT, NUI Maynooth, Mary Immaculate Limerick
Group 4: Limerick IT, Jordanstown, Dublin IT