

JÜRGEN SAID TO ME



JÜRGEN KLOPP, LIVERPOOL AND THE REMAKING OF A CITY

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Part 1

Change

Chapter 1

Key to the City

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE to mention Liverpool without factoring in its football clubs or musical influence. They run through it like the snaking and arching road of Queens Drive, which pierces the city from north to south. These forces carry the city culturally and communally and shape new generations of men and women on their journey: from The Cavern to The State, from Anfield to Goodison Park.

You can look beyond the stadiums, museums and Matthew Street sentimentality to feel it. Walk past any karaoke pub – of which there are many – and The Beatles will likely be blurring from within. The odds of them being covered well are lower, but you'd be a fool to quibble about quality when 'Norwegian Wood' is emanating from Coopers Bar at 11am.

Listen to any conversation on a walk around the place and football won't be far away. In the years that preceded Klopp's arrival, Liverpool had become a topic of frustration among its own. A team managed by Brendan Rodgers regressed quite spectacularly following the whirlwind Premier League title charge of 2013/14. It led to another sense of false dawns and distant paths to glory at home and abroad. The mood was one of disillusionment; not just on the pitch, but also towards Liverpool's American owners, Fenway Sports Group (FSG), and their general running of the club.

Rodgers's era was marred by squabble and disagreement relating to the club's infamous transfer committee, and a frustration around not punching its weight as a football

powerhouse. The club hadn't had anywhere near the amount of success it demands. Without trophies it's impossible to envisage Liverpool as a true representation of its supporters and city. It's been the minimum requirement since Bill Shankly promised to make the club a 'bastion of invincibility' from 1959 to 1974.

The failed and almost fatal era of Tom Hicks and George Gillett's ownership from 2007–2010 – in which John W. Henry's 11th-hour, High Court ownership battle ensured he could take the reins at Anfield – had left the club with no identifiable path to future success. A new stadium on Stanley Park was all but dead as a concept – the idea of Anfield expansion was now the preferred route. But Liverpool had, and still have, work to do on this front.

Anfield is a deprived area, and the club has, at times, been far from a perfect neighbour. From certain quarters there was a sense the club didn't care about the community. This led to a wider sense of disassociation from an enterprise so pivotal and inescapable to local lives.

Klopp came into a club that, for an entire generation, had been united with its collective supporter base in brief spurts and fleeting moments, only for fragmentation to take hold once again.

Rafael Benítez had at least generated a sense of unity strong enough to galvanise his early years between 2004 and 2007. Yet the Spaniard – for all his goodwill and intention – was so deep in the trenches of Hicks's and Gillett's subterfuge that he soon became battle-worn by a job that has come to overwhelm and consume so many.

In my supporting Liverpool life, the period of pre-Klopp success that sticks out most was Gérard Houllier's 2000/01 season when Liverpool went on to win a treble of Worthington, FA and UEFA Cups, as well as qualifying for the Champions League via a third-place finish. I witnessed an incredibly resolute team – one Jamie Carragher cites as the best he played in – coupled with an equally resolute style.

Houllier built his team on discipline and tactical frugality. To win, they had to be harder than any other to break down. That often drew criticism whenever stalemates were played out, or when his team dived with the odds to eventually prosper.

There was a generation of supporters steadily giving way to another who hadn't experienced what many had known to be 'the Liverpool way' – a team that not only wins but represents values and understands what's required. A team that's an embodiment of its city.

Houllier's team, like Benítez's, had a limited shelf life. It felt like they'd hit their peak early, and the squad was troubled by a boom-and-bust element.

Until 2015 and Klopp's arrival, the club was a supine enterprise that should have been so much more. That it wasn't hurt people and impacted its overall energy. Liverpool is a global footballing superpower in the heartland of what feels like a small communal village: the city knows the business of everything and everyone. Behaviours are a group endeavour.

It's only now that I've left Liverpool for the first time in my life that I feel able to both assess and appreciate its complexity. Its aesthetic beauty is unquestionable, and, as avid Mancunian Terry Christian admitted on an LFCTV documentary: 'You lot got the prettier city.' It's the phantasmagoria that makes me stomach-churningly miss home. It's the whispering complexities of the place that leave me still needing more time away to decompress and fully understand it.

Being somewhere else leaves me with a need to retrain. I no longer associate a car horn with someone I know making an overt attempt to say hello. Taxi drivers have no desire for interaction from menial destination queries to the question of 'Red or Blue', which will define the comfort of your remaining journey. No longer can I walk into The Crocodile pub on Harringdon Street, on a Sunday football team night out, and find at least five people I've either played with or against, who

will tell me how they know someone who knows someone who knows a friend of mine or a family member.

Liverpool is a heaving metropolis of unfinished cycle lanes and unnecessary roadworks. Yet it will somehow still allow you to be anywhere in 20 minutes. It's an inner-city struggle paired with stunning waterfront architecture. It's colloquialisms and quick wordplay for purposes of laughs, and the constant evading of law enforcement's prying eyes and ears.

People supporting the club from outside Liverpool often reference feelings of alienation along with incredible warmth. Supporters inside the city will tell you they feel less valued than those outside. To unite these elements seems at times so impossible that most managers don't bother trying. The only way is to show that you understand that people will ultimately invest in what they see with equal measure. But doing this with feeling is usually of no interest or importance, or, worse still, fabricated.

What makes Klopp the person who somehow knitted so many complicated fractions together? A man born under Germany's post-war cloud in the Swabian town of Glatten, who had no affiliation or real understanding of Liverpool's inner workings.

Jürgen was the son of Elisabeth and Norbert Klopp – the latter a professional goalkeeper and salesman with a passion for sport in all forms, notably football, tennis and boxing. Elisabeth had previously given birth to two daughters: Stefanie and Isolde. To the relief of all, Jürgen was the last child to come along, but Norbert felt he could transmit his fatherly love and desire for sporting competition into a boy who might go on to become a professional footballer as he was.

Klopp would later describe how his father would take him running daily in all terrains. He would let Jürgen run the perimeter of a football field before eventually taking him over; that is, until Norbert could no longer catch up to his protégé's improved stamina.

An early start into the competitive and physical demands of elite sport led Jürgen to a modest playing career. He later described himself as having a ‘fourth division talent with a first division brain’. In 1990 his journey eventually took him to Mainz 05 under the guidance of the man Klopp considers his greatest sporting influence, Wolfgang Frank. The introspective coach would go on to revolutionise German football’s long-held belief that success was built on the employment of a sweeper system by demolishing it and replacing it with a high-pressing flat back four.

Frank coupled this tactical iconoclasm with running. He was an advocate of finding marginal gains that made his players fitter. He felt he could marry this with a style of play based on Arrigo Sacchi’s AC Milan that would later be described by Mainz CEO Christian Heidel as ‘ball orientated zonal marking’.

At first his players struggled to adapt. Fans raged in the stands at how much space they were seeing being vacated in front of them. They feared that an opposition midfielder could run through them easily, or a press could be bypassed by a long ball over the top of the defence to leave the striker with a free run on goal. None of this aligned with Germany’s conservative approach that had won them three World Cups.

Frank’s principles – shifting opposing players into positions where they weren’t allowed space and time, combined with and regaining possession high up the pitch – were eventually beginning to show on the pitch. The modest outfit went from relegation certainties in the eyes of the German media to unlikely promotion contenders by the winter break of 1997.

If Frank’s blueprint is a familiar one to Liverpool supporters, his character was definitely what set him apart from Klopp. Described as having a schoolteacher persona, Frank’s innate attention to detail meant he took setbacks and defeats very badly. In two stints at Mainz, he left abruptly after a run of bad results that were far from catastrophic. His legacy and mark had already been left on Klopp, who had completed a degree

in sports science in 1995 while keeping a keen and sometimes critical eye on coaches and their systems post-Frank.

It was when Heidelberg and Mainz took the decision to gamble on Klopp, following the dismissal of Eckhard Krautzun early in the 2000/01 season, that everyone realised they'd stumbled on something. Heidelberg knew he had a squad of players that understood each other and the system. He believed the players could coach themselves; all they needed was someone at the helm with their name above the door. He decided that would be the veteran squad member Klopp (much to the amusement of the journalists who attended the press conference that unveiled him). 'The whole table roared with laughter. They cracked up,' Heidelberg stated in Raphael Honigstein's 2017 book *Klopp: Bring the Noise*.

Klopp steered Mainz to safety in Germany's second tier at the end of 2001. He was adamant that the greatest lesson of all, even in his managerial infancy, was that he needed passion and buy-in from everyone at the club to push forward. Suddenly, people were taking Klopp the manager deadly serious.

Klopp made an invisible contract with players and supporters alike. He would lay down the gauntlet of giving everything, in return for receiving just that. He was rewarded with a two-year deal with the aim of making 'little old Mainz' a Bundesliga club.

Two seasons of devastating last-gasp setbacks would see them miss out on promotion in a manner that was enough to break anyone. Yet Klopp, operating on a shoestring budget and with a provincial city modestly offering its backing, remained defiantly unmovable.

'We will pick ourselves up,' he was quoted as saying. 'We are still young, nobody has to give up just yet. We're determined to do so much more for the city and our fans. I know that people say: "Mainz will never do it." But they have a problem. We'll be back. Anyone who writes us off is making a serious mistake,' he vowed.

Consecutive seasons of missing out on taking Mainz to the Promised Land by a single goal and a single point meant promotion the season after. A modest tally of 54 points was enough to finish third. The city was in full party mode, led by a man who always knew and appreciated when the time to enjoy life with a beer was upon him.

Mainz finished their first-ever Bundesliga season in 11th place, and the brand and identity of Klopp's aggressive football never wavered. Mainz were doing things their way – the only way they knew how under Klopp – and it was reaping benefits. The supporters were pinching themselves that summer, after the team had inadvertently qualified for the UEFA Cup by way of Fair Play rankings. It would prove to be a blessing and a curse, with extra exertion hugely affecting the domestic form in 2005/06.

Although the European campaign was short-lived, Mainz eventually regrouped in the league to match their 11th-place finish of the previous season. Klopp had signed a two-year extension in that time. To Heidel and the board he was the single-most important asset the club had possessed in their history.

The next season brought the club crashing down to earth. A devastating start to the campaign left them with too great a mountain to climb. After 102 intoxicating matches in the top flight, FSV descended back into the second tier of German football.

Klopp was unable to regain promotion in 2007/08, missing out once again on the final day to TSG 1899 Hoffenheim. Throughout the season, advances from other clubs had come in, including FC Bayern Munich, but nothing had materialised. Had Mainz won promotion, Klopp had stated he would commit to a new deal. But by that time a new club was in conversation with Weidel to make him their coach. It was, like every step in Klopp's managerial career, the perfect move at the perfect time.

The hiring of Klopp at a flailing Borussia Dortmund in 2008 was viewed by many as a gamble. Perhaps none more

so than the club's ultras. The most passionate members of its supporter base assumed that hiring a manager from a club like Mainz was unambitious and wouldn't raise them from their perpetual state of slumber. They were quickly won over by Klopp, who met them with his wife Ulla to understand the club and its fans more. He talked, laughed and played cards with the group until, like most who encounter him, they were eating out of his hands.

If the supporters were excited by Klopp the man, they would soon see that the principles he'd learned from Frank were becoming even more defined. But the philosophy would take time and result in some major setbacks and questions about his credentials.

Klopp stood by his gegenpressing strategy, insisting to his players that it wasn't about retreating when they lost the ball; instead, they should surge forward in a buzz of yellow and black to win it back immediately. Everything had to be in unison or it wouldn't work. If a player setting the press missed, the next one had to be ready to join instinctively by being in the right position.

The replacement of players such as Croatian Mladen Petrić – the club's leading scorer from the previous season – raised eyebrows, but he was insistent some were not right for the system. Instead, faith was placed in a 19-year-old centre-back partnership of Neven Subotić and Mats Hummels, initially on loan from Bayern. Klopp also brought in players such as Mohamed Zidan, who he'd worked with at Mainz, and tireless forward Lucas Barrios.

But it was the €4.25m signing of Robert Lewandowski from Lech Poznań in 2010 that would go down in history. He would go on to score 103 goals in 74 matches, 25 of which proved to be match-winning strikes.

Lewandowski was part of a machine-like force of yellow that ripped through the Bundesliga and catapulted Dortmund to the league title in 2010/11 and 2011/12. The famous Yellow

Wall in the Signal Iduna Park was shaken to its foundations by the sheer ecstasy of such an unthinkable achievement.

Klopp had built a formula, for players who were fitter, smarter and too tactically sharp for anyone to match. It had taken three years of disciplined strategic implementation coupled with astute plays in the transfer market from Sporting Director Michael Zorc for things to fully click into place.

Consecutive Bundesliga titles were complemented by a 5-2 final win in the DFB-Pokal over Bayern Munich at the Olympic Stadium. The Bavarians were embarrassed, with Bayern CEO Karl-Heinz Rummenigge describing every goal like a 'slap in the face'. Klopp, on the other hand, had described the win as 'the most extraordinary moment in [Dortmund] history'.

That was enough for a Munich call to arms. They flexed their football muscles with sinewing plagiarism. Not only did Bayern imitate a style of high-energy pressing from the front line, but they did it with a more expensively assembled squad. Those squad additions included targeting Dortmund's key assets. On the eve of a Champions League semi-final with Real Madrid in 2013, news broke that academy graduate, wunderkind and true Dortmunder Mario Götze was joining Bayern after they'd triggered a release clause in his contract. That was followed swiftly by increasing talk that Lewandowski was bound for the Allianz Arena that summer. Klopp had already had to deal with setbacks of losing Shinji Kagawa and Nuri Şahin, but the potential loss of Götze and Lewandowski would be seen as catastrophic.

Dortmund rallied and ran all over José Mourinho's Real Madrid to set up a Der Klassiker final with Bayern at Wembley. A slender 2-1 defeat would once again contribute to Klopp's modesty and awareness that football can throw you miracles and heartbreak in equal measure. Klopp reiterated his belief that everything is about the next 90 minutes, and in every one of those minutes you have to fight with your life, or you'll earn nothing.

After back-to-back titles, Klopp's Dortmund would twice finish as runners-up to Pep Guardiola's new-look Bayern. Dortmund continued to lose key players via a transfer strategy that reaffirmed their place in the food chain: always one rung below their biggest German counterparts and other global superclubs.

When the domestic winter break arrived in 2014/15, Dortmund were languishing in the lower half of the table thanks to a horrendous injury run and disrupted pre-season – one of the things Klopp strives to avoid ahead of every campaign. They would eventually finish seventh but, a year after Klopp had signed a new deal, he knew it was time to depart.

Within that time he held talks with Edward Woodward and Manchester United after David Moyes's ill-fated run as manager had ended. Woodward tried to sell United as 'an adult version of Disneyland', completely misreading both the room and person he was wooing. Klopp turned United down, but a glimpse of his next destination had come in the summer of 2014, when he brought Dortmund to Anfield for a friendly. Laying out his biggest smile and bringing his booming laugh, he followed tradition and touched the 'This is Anfield' sign when leaving the tunnel. Klopp had Liverpool's attention and vice versa.

When Liverpool contacted Klopp's agent, Marc Kossicke, due diligence was conducted. Klopp met with FSG in New York and provided a dossier on his playing style and all other factors he deemed imperative to success. Everything centred on uniting the club to push the team forward.

Klopp had to reignite the spark of a collective supporter base that had dwindled after too many false starts and fracturing elements. The club still had an identity, but this was often its downfall: it relied on a vision of itself no longer relevant to the meandering outfit it had become.

On the day Klopp was appointed manager, 8 October 2015, his press conference was remembered for soundbites about him being 'the normal one', and how we had to turn 'doubters to

believers'. There was, however, a more nuanced insight into his workings and the impact he would have on a place when asked about how it felt to be manager of the club: 'It's not important what people said when you come in, but what they say when you leave. If we want, this could be a special day. We can start in a very difficult league and in a special Liverpool way we can be successful. If we sit here in four years, I think we win a title, I'm pretty sure.'

He also made reference to the weight of Liverpool's history being somewhat burdensome, stating that carrying history 'like a backpack' wouldn't be allowed – another sign he was willing to be bold in challenging the club's supporters. This was Klopp laying a marker for meeting halfway. In that moment he didn't care about image. What mattered was showing the people his team would give everything in terms of hard work, representation and values.

It's important to remember how football was being consumed and digested around this time. The emergence of more accessible fan engagement meant that there was always a counter-narrative to be found. Platforms were, and remain, optional to engage with, but they fast became the go-to place for the instant reaction and content we crave. Even the most joyous of days like Klopp's arrival can be sullied by the persecution and dissenting voice from the faceless online.

Social media now creates far more instant pressure than any of the tabloid press hounds that dominated previous decades. There's no longer outrage and opinion saved cynically for morning print. There was also the rise of more fan media and platforms, which allowed people to access relatable insight on a topic they were already routinely invested in.

It's what led to my own eventual contribution on *The Anfield Wrap*, to me changing careers and inevitably to this book. I'd often felt there was a place for me in this field, and Klopp to Liverpool elevated that to another level because of my interest in him as a person.

I instantly thought of this, and him, as being different. I was witnessing something beyond the semantics of performances and results. More fascinating was the sense of feeling a shift in an entire city. Klopp had lit the pyrotechnics and Liverpool was a smoking red blaze.

What followed was a journey so mesmeric and inspiring most would have struggled to believe. It has captured togetherness, human will, social impact and a place in time so perfectly that it feels like we've borne witness to an astrological phenomenon.

Klopp has become more than the leading figure of footballing operations at a sporting institution. He has become a figurehead for matters relating to everyday life and society, to the point that the world of politics is now calling for him to use his skillset there.

At the heart of this lies a city of unbreakable character, despite being tested to its limit. Liverpool is steeped in tradition and trauma. It will give you its heart, but don't dare cast an envious glance elsewhere. It's the best dressed, most outspoken and, at times, most confusing place on the planet, but its beauty and authenticity can't be equalled. It's a city that most of the time deserves better than its lot from local and central government, yet still finds a way to look after itself.

Klopp did and does understand all of this. On Wednesday, 2 November 2022, at a special ceremony held at Liverpool Town Hall, he was awarded the Freedom of the City of Liverpool, an honour granted to individuals to recognise exceptional services to the city. In his interview with the club when announcing his departure, he admitted he didn't know such an honour existed. When accepting the accolade, he stated:

Over the years you realise that the Scouse people and us as a family have a lot of things in common. We care about similar things, have similar political views and we like to be very open, that's how it is. All people

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around me, my friends and family, see more of the city than I do, and I hear that they enjoy it exactly because of that; because people are really open, nice, kind and friendly. That's what I want to be as well.