

Jonathon Aspey

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Chapter 1

Enter Dalglish

THE HEYSEL Stadium disaster is an event that will forever be remembered by Liverpool Football Club, and the impact of that event on Liverpool, Juventus, British and European football cannot be overstated. The relationship between English football and European football was damaged in a way that only Italia '90 would help fix. The tragic events of 29 May 1985, and the 39 souls who lost their lives, lived long in the memory of all who were present and witnessed the collapse of the separating wall, and the aftermath. In a truly rare example for football, the game became completely secondary, and shouldn't have been played. One of those present who was undoubtedly impacted by the disaster was the then Liverpool manager Joe Fagan. A long-term member of the fabled Boot Room, Fagan had become manager following the retirement of the legendary

Bob Paisley in 1983, and had embarked on a fantastic run as Liverpool boss, with the 1983/84 season being one of the most legendary seasons in the history of Liverpool Football Club. Months prior to the end of the 1984/85 season, Fagan had made the decision to retire, and had humanised himself to the players as soon as the game ended, telling them they could call him Joe, rather than 'Boss'. When Fagan stepped off the plane with fellow Boot Room member Roy Evans, the emotional toll that Heysel had taken on him was clear for all to see.

From a footballing perspective, the question turned to how to replace another Boot Room member. In a few short years, the football club had said goodbye to Paisley and Fagan. In news that shocked some – although rumours had started to spread – the board announced just a day after Heysel on 30 May 1985, that 34-year old Kenny Dalglish was set to become the first player-manager in the history of the Reds. Of course, Dalglish had known well in advance that he was making the step up, having almost been offered the job over the telephone by Peter Robinson. Despite Dalglish's undoubted status as a club legend, having scored 157 goals in the famous red kit, it has to be said that there were many who questioned the board's decision to replace Fagan with a man who

was effectively a complete novice in management, even if by 1985 he had been a leader in the dressing room alongside figures such as Graeme Souness and Alan Hansen for years. However, Dalglish had Bob Paisley to turn to as an advisor, in a relationship that could only have helped him in the early days of his tenure at Anfield.

Dalglish's tenure also started without European football. After finishing second to Howard Kendall's Everton in the 1984/85 season, Liverpool were supposed to be playing in the UEFA Cup in 1985/86. However, on 2 June 1985, UEFA banned all English clubs from competing in Europe and left English club sides in the European wilderness, an exile that would last until after the previously mentioned 1990 World Cup in Italy. Liverpool suffered greater punishment than the rest of English football, as they were given an additional three years on top of the European ban.

Dalglish also had to tackle the pressure that several of his former colleagues – who had become his underlings – were coming towards the end of their time at the club, and he needed to not only manage those egos on their way out of the club, but also find suitable and quality replacements that would see Liverpool into a new golden age with King Kenny at the helm. Not only that, but

Dalglish needed to establish himself in a different role at Anfield and Melwood, with players that had become close colleagues and in many cases friends, such as Alan Hansen. Needless to say, the task that befell Kenny Dalglish in his first season as player-manager of Liverpool in 1985/86 was not insignificant. Incredibly, Dalglish went into the job with the practicality to say that if he performed below the expectations of a Liverpool manager, the board simply needed to cancel his contract as manager, and continue his contract as a player – on which he still had three years remaining. Dalglish would later state that he knew it would be difficult, and a huge change for the players.

One of the first big decisions made by Dalglish as manager was the selection of a new club captain. Full-back Phil Neal had been captain at Anfield since the beginning of the 1984/85 season, and had won 50 caps for England at this point, having established himself as one of the best full-backs in Europe through the 1970s and 1980s. Despite this, Dalglish chose Alan Hansen as his captain – a decision that shocked the Scottish centre-back. With a reputation as one of the most elegant and skilful defenders in the history of the British game, Hansen became the dominant personality in an Anfield dressing

room that was entering a new phase under Dalglish. Dalglish's reasoning for the change was: 'A captain has to be fortunate, has to be lucky, as well as good.' Dalglish's early decisions belied an innate managerial intuition that would serve him well throughout his tenure as Liverpool manager. However, Dalglish wouldn't make this decision permanent until partway through September, so as Liverpool's season began on 27 July 1985, Neal remained in place as skipper, with a testimonial scheduled for him in pre-season, although he continued to call Dalglish 'Kenny', rather than the agreed name of 'Boss'.

Neal's testimonial concluded an up and down pre-season schedule for the Reds, with dominant wins over Burnley, Brighton & Hove Albion and Charlton Athletic providing excitement for the red half of the city, but draws with Crewe Alexandra and Bristol City also received comments about the players looking 'lethargic'. Neal's testimonial was in a Merseyside derby with Everton, the Blues winning 3-2, despite Neal scoring from the penalty spot.

Without the Charity Shield to play for – league champions Everton defeated FA Cup winners Manchester United 2-0 at Wembley – Dalglish's first selection to face Arsenal in front of over 38,000 – the opening day of 1985/86 saw

the lowest opening-day attendances since the war, clearly the impact of the negative press attention English football was receiving – at Anfield on the first matchday of the league campaign on 17 August 1985 was:

Grobelaar, Neal, Kennedy, Lawrenson,
Whelan, Hansen, Dalglish, Nicol, Rush,
Mølby, Beglin.

Steve Nicol and Jim Beglin were on the right and left flank, respectively, and both had a key role in Liverpool's opening-day victory, as Nicol scored Liverpool's second and assisted the first for Ronnie Whelan as Liverpool eased to a 2-0 victory, but they could have scored plenty more in the second half. Prior to the game, a service was held in remembrance of those lost in Brussels, and the Kop sang 'You'll Never Walk Alone', following the chorus of 'Abide with Me', although sound issues plagued the service itself.

The remainder of August saw Liverpool taste defeat only once, as they lost 1-0 to Jack Charlton's Newcastle United at St James' Park, but several dropped points saw the Reds sit eighth in the table, with draws away against West Ham United at the Boleyn Ground, and Aston Villa at Villa Park. In

several of those games, Liverpool were seemingly out of sorts, and Dalglish stated after the draw to West Ham, 'We have played three away games and lost five goals, and it cost us seven points. Of those five goals four were from defensive errors, which is not good enough for any club, and certainly not Liverpool'.

Significant questions were being asked about Liverpool's playing staff early in Dalglish's tenure, and the biggest targets were Bruce Grobbelaar, the brilliant but eccentric man between the posts, and Phil Neal. Neal made way for Steve Nicol at right-back, with Neal making his last appearance for Liverpool in November, before leaving the club in December to become player-manager of Bolton Wanderers. Dalglish and Liverpool knew Neal wanted to move into management and that he was disappointed not to have been offered the Liverpool job. As a result, the club didn't stand in his way. Further changes were also rumoured, with Liverpool linked to the all-action midfielder Steve McMahon. Dalglish was clearly looking to replace the box-to-box presence left by the departure of Graeme Souness from the club in 1984. McMahon officially signed with the Reds in September for a fee of £350,000 and went on to be a cornerstone of Dalglish's great side. Going the other way was Alan Kennedy, for

£100,000 to Sunderland. A stalwart at left-back since making his debut in 1978, a poor start to the season saw Dalglish eventually replace him with Jim Beglin, as the legendary Bob Paisley's final Liverpool signing became the full-time left-back, shifting back from midfield.

Speaking of September, the month saw Liverpool unbeaten in the league, as the Reds dropped points only once, and quickly climbed up the table. Dalglish's side finished the month second in the First Division, and with the bragging rights of the city, having beaten league champions Everton at Goodison Park in one of the games of the season, with 51,000 at Goodison having the privilege of watching the game. Dalglish had given Jan Mølby the role of playing sweeper, and he thrived in the role, orchestrating Liverpool's play. Liverpool were lightning on the counter, and raced into a two-goal lead within 20 minutes through goals by Dalglish and Rush. McMahon made it 3-0 before half-time. Everton raced back late on in the second half, which brought the game to a terrific crescendo, but Liverpool held on, despite Dalglish uncharacteristically missing some guilt-edged chances to extend Liverpool's lead, as he missed twice from point-blank range with Neville Southall already seemingly beaten. The only black cloud of the

month was the runaway league leaders, Manchester United.

For the next two months, Liverpool continued their pace and maintained their position in second behind United, having won all but three times, with draws against Southampton, Chelsea and against United at Old Trafford. At Old Trafford, Dalglish's Reds had frankly battered Ron Atkinson's side, with the home team desperately lucky to come away without a beating. Liverpool did everything but win. To all, it simply seemed a matter of time before Liverpool took their rightful place on their perch at the top of the table, and English football in general, despite the ten-point gap that existed between first and second. November at least saw Liverpool get the victory over United they had so richly deserved at Old Trafford, when they welcomed the league leaders to Anfield in the Milk Cup. Mølby scored two goals in two minutes, the second being a penalty, but the first being a glorious run from his own half, scything through a back-peddling United defence, before he smashed the ball past United goalkeeper Gary Bailey from just outside the box.

However, it was not a merry Christmas for Liverpool, as they went on to have a horror show of a December, winning on 7 December against Aston

Villa at Anfield, but going winless until 4 January. This included defeats against Arsenal at Highbury and Manchester City at Maine Road, as well as draws against Jack Charlton's Newcastle side – again – and Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest. Dalglish would later state that he felt the team were playing well enough, but they just weren't getting the results.

January saw a bounce back from the Reds, who went perfect through the rest of the month, which included wins in the Milk Cup and FA Cup to progress Liverpool through to the semi-final and fifth round, respectively. The six straight wins in January saw Liverpool score 19 goals and, as a result, Dalglish received the Manager of the Month award. Unfortunately, Liverpool's January purple patch came to a screeching halt, as they won only once in February, in an FA Cup fifth-round replay against Third Division side York City, winning 3-1 at Anfield after a 1-1 draw at Bootham Crescent. Most disappointing, however, was the 2-0 defeat to Everton at Anfield through goals by Kevin Ratcliffe – a shot from distance that was deflected and slowly squirmed under the body of Grobbelaar – and Gary Lineker – who had expertly broken the Liverpool offside trap to ease the ball past the Zimbabwean one on one. That defeat, for many, ended any hopes

of challenging for a league title in Dalglish's first season. Even worse, the defeat took Everton top by three points, with Liverpool a further ten adrift.

Days later, Liverpool were knocked out of the Milk Cup by Queens Park Rangers in the semi-final after a 2-2 draw in the second leg, following a 1-0 defeat in the first. February of 1986 caused Alan Hansen to tell Dalglish that this was by a long distance the worst Liverpool team he'd ever played in. Liverpool also had injury concerns throughout February, with Dalglish himself unavailable at times through injury, as well as forward Paul Walsh, who had ruptured his ankle ligaments in the 1-1 draw with Manchester United on 9 February, after enjoying a tempestuous start to life with Dalglish as player-manager, which had seen the pair verbally clash in the dressing room. Steve McMahon had also been unavailable for the nine matches before the Merseyside derby at Anfield. As bad as things looked after the derby for all those wearing red in the city, it was the last time Dalglish's Liverpool would lose all season.

You would have been forgiven for not immediately assuming that would happen, however, as Liverpool required an injury-time winner from Ian Rush to beat Spurs at the beginning of March,

following another mistake by Bruce Grobbelaar that gave Tottenham the lead in the third minute. Nevertheless, it was the first Liverpool victory at White Hart Lane since 1975, and kept Dalglish's men in the title hunt, despite being eight points behind the blue half of Merseyside. Several reports stated that the player-manager had given the players an absolute rollocking at half-time. With Dalglish having not named himself in the first team, the creative responsibility laid at the talented feet of the Great Dane, Jan Mølby, and he duly repaid his manager, laying on assist after assist.

Dalglish returned to the line-up in Liverpool's next league match ,however, as they gained quick revenge on Queens Park Rangers for knocking them out of the Milk Cup by battering them 4-1 at Anfield to climb to second in the table. Steve McMahon scored the first before Dalglish laid on a pair of assists, the first for his telepathic partner Ian Rush, the second for midfielder John Wark. McMahon scored his second in the 75th minute, with the assist being provided by Beglin from left-back. Despite McMahon's brace, the attention landed at the feet of the player-manager, who retained his ability to create from absolutely nothing, and set up the most difficult of goals in seemingly the easiest of ways.

Dalglish was a regular feature of the starting line-up as Liverpool's momentum built and built though the remainder of 1985/86.

A hectic fixture schedule throughout the rest of March 1986 saw Liverpool fail to win only twice, the first a 0-0 draw with Watford in the FA Cup sixth round at Anfield, with the visitors putting in a defensive performance that made life difficult for the Reds. Dalglish had implied on the day of the game that goals were highly likely, so a 0-0 draw was a surprise for the nearly 37,000 in attendance at Anfield. Despite being forced into a replay, a 2-1 win after extra time at Vicarage Road saw Liverpool through to the semis. Watford had taken the lead with a fantastic free kick from one John Barnes, the hyper-talented left-winger who terrified defences all across England, but Jan Mølby equalised from the penalty spot, and Rush scored in extra time to keep hopes alive of a Merseyside derby in the FA Cup Final.

Liverpool's second draw of the month was 0-0 against Sheffield Wednesday at Hillsborough in the First Division. Otherwise, all of Liverpool's other games that month were wins, against Southampton, Oxford United and Manchester City. Looking back, Alan Hansen stated that the team just began a run,

and the momentum kept them going through the rest of the season. From being a team that looked well off the pace in February, the 2-0 win over City – with both goals scored by McMahon – saw Liverpool go top of the First Division on goal difference. One goal difference, thanks to Everton's draw against Manchester United.

McMahon's second goal deserves specific mention as a great Liverpool goal, built from the back in the classic Liverpool style. Bruce Grobbelaar dropped the ball off to Hansen at the back, and the Scottish centre-back passed forwards to Ronnie Whelan in midfield. Whelan exchanged with Jim Beglin, who laid the ball inside to Hansen, who had moved up into midfield. Another progressive pass from Hansen was fired into the feet of Dalglish, who executed a deft flick to lay the ball to Jan Mølby, who laid the ball out to the right flank to Craig Johnston with one touch. From there, Johnston fired in a hard, low cross that met McMahon at the back post, and the midfielder's sliding finish saw the ball fizz past Barry Siddall in the City net. Liverpool are a team with a history of scoring great goals, but this one ranks pretty highly, and was a taster of the aesthetic beauty that Dalglish's team would go on to achieve in later years.

At the other end of the pitch, since the two-legged defeat to QPR in the Milk Cup, Liverpool had only conceded three goals. What's more, the club had seen the emergence of Gary Gillespie, who had partnered Hansen excellently, as he began to stake his claim for the ever-dependable Mark Lawrenson's place in defence.

April 1986 began with Liverpool again needing to go to extra time to progress in the FA Cup, and it was again the ever-dependable Ian Rush that was the Reds' saviour at White Hart Lane, as he scored twice after 90 minutes against Southampton to send Liverpool through to the final at Wembley. They were set to face none other than Everton in the last game of the season on 10 May. From nowhere, Liverpool found themselves in with a chance of winning the club's first-ever league and cup double, and the first in English football since Arsenal achieved the feat in 1970/71.

Dalglish's side followed up the FA Cup semi-final with a 5-0 victory over Coventry City as they returned to league action at Anfield. Ronnie Whelan bagged himself a hat-trick, as the Reds now looked peerless, unstoppable, brilliant – whichever adjective you care to assign them. Despite Liverpool's incredible form, Everton continued to win, firstly

against Arsenal and then Watford, to keep their noses just ahead, but Dalglish's team also continued to win, beating Luton Town 1-0 at Kenilworth Road on the astroturf surface. Three days later, a poor Liverpool performance at The Hawthorns against West Bromwich Albion required the individual brilliance of both Dalglish and Rush to secure a 2-1 victory that kept them top of the First Division. When Everton failed to beat Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest days later, the door swung wide open for Liverpool to achieve breathing space at the top.

Liverpool marched their way through the door with a 5-0 victory at Anfield over Birmingham City that saw Gary Gillespie score an unlikely hat-trick. This performance demonstrated quite clearly how far Dalglish's side – and therefore Dalglish himself – had come in just nine months, looking more than worthy champions as they marched towards a richly deserved league title. When Everton succumbed to defeat against Oxford United, and Liverpool won in their next game against Leicester City – Oxford's win caused quite the celebration in the Kop – with goals by Rush and Whelan, it meant a draw against Chelsea in their final game would effectively bring the First Division trophy back across Stanley Park, with Howard Kendall's men unlikely to overturn

the huge goal difference Liverpool had amassed. Having said that, Alan Hansen would later admit that Liverpool at the time had a poor away record at Chelsea's Stamford Bridge. Despite the record, confidence was high in the red side of Liverpool heading into the final day. Meanwhile, Howard Kendall said, 'Suddenly, I'm a Chelsea supporter,' as he and his reigning league champions found fate out of their own hands on the final day.

Anfield legend and stalwart Jan Mølby found himself unable to play in the decider, failing a late fitness test, but his place in the back three was taken by Mark Lawrenson. Chelsea started well, with Liverpool barely getting the ball for the first five minutes of the game, but eventually the Reds settled and began to play the football they had played in the latter half of the 1985/86 season. Midway through the first half, Liverpool pushed forwards, having a Jim Beglin shot cleared off the line and out for a throw-in. Craig Johnston took the throw towards Gary Gillespie, who flicked it on, but the ball was cleared away, only as far as Ronnie Whelan. Whelan then tried a shot that ricocheted off a Chelsea leg into the path of Beglin, whose weighted pass found Kenny Dalglish just inside the box. In typical Dalglish fashion, King Kenny chested the ball into

his path, and his guided right-foot volley found the bottom corner of the Chelsea net as Tony Godden came out to save. As Dalglish wheeled away to celebrate, he was on the verge of becoming the first-ever player-manager to win the First Division. As the commentary team said, the manager was leading by example.

Chelsea pushed forwards in search of an equaliser in the second half, but when the final whistle went after the 90 minutes, Kenny Dalglish's Liverpool had once again reclaimed their position at the very top of English football, when so many had written them off earlier in the season, and had written off Dalglish as manager, in particular. In the hours after lifting the trophy as both player and manager, Dalglish stated that he'd had plenty of help along the way – and to be fair, he had, from Bob Paisley, Ronnie Moran, Roy Evans and Tom Saunders – but that modesty was typical of Dalglish, who was bestowed the Manager of the Year award for 1985/86. Dalglish had done what many others would have failed to do, steady the ship after the retirement of Joe Fagan, the spectre of Heyssel, and had begun to rebuild the Liverpool side. To do so *and* win a league title was quite an achievement that should not be understated in the great seasons in Liverpool's history – even if it's not

the season this book will focus on most. Of course, there was still the double to go for, in a Merseyside derby at Wembley.

Merseyside emptied for the 1985/86 FA Cup Final, as tens of thousands of Liverpudlians made their way south to London for the game. It was the first Merseyside derby in the history of the FA Cup Final. The city became a sea of red and blue, as each household – and indeed bedroom – demonstrated the side of Stanley Park they held allegiance to. Given everything that the city of Liverpool withstood through the 1980s – poverty, drugs, tensions in the Labour Party over the Liverpool council, Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government – the game meant more than just a normal FA Cup Final, or even a normal Merseyside derby. Chants of ‘Scousers here, Scousers there, Scousers every-fucking-where’ and ‘Merseyside, Merseyside’ were heard throughout the day, as Liverpool and Everton fans took the opportunity to unite in demonstration of unity and collective support. Only in Liverpool.

Dalglish’s side for the FA Cup Final was:

Grobelaar, Nicol, Lawrenson, Hansen,
Beglin, Johnston, Mølby, MacDonald,
Dalglish, Rush.