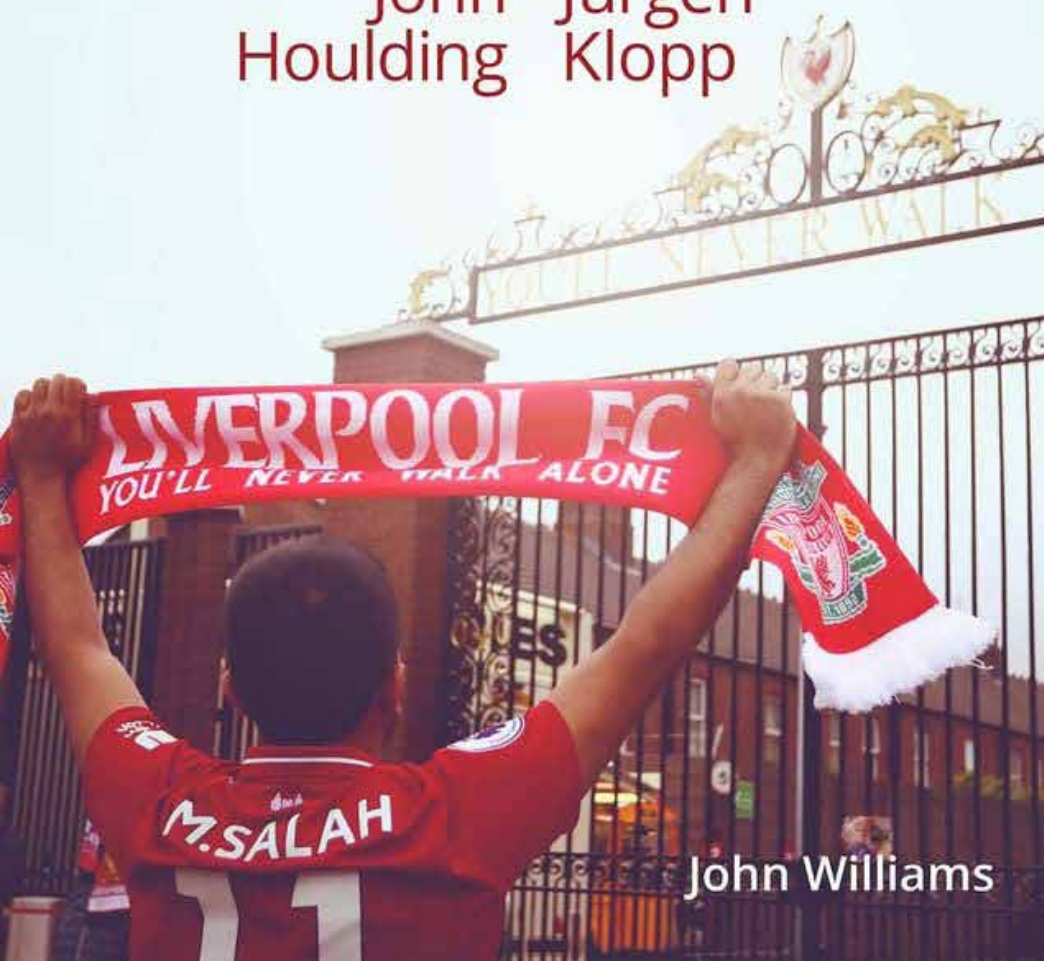


A SOCIAL HISTORY OF LIVERPOOL FOOTBALL CLUB

RED MEN REBORN

From To
John Jürgen
Houlding Klopp



John Williams

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Chapter 1

The Impossible Quadruple

The extraordinary 2021/22 season

Liverpool's owners FSG are blessed with a boss who loves his players and is reluctant to spend big money. Jürgen Klopp also discovers the domestic cup competitions at last but injuries and doubt are never too far away. A familiar face turns up across Stanley Park in 2021, although he is not universally welcomed. A record win at Old Trafford precedes a canter at Goodison and, generally, there are goals galore, even if Liverpool's game management sometimes falls short. The Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) proves no problem and Wembley calls – three times. By the middle of May 2022, Liverpool are still active in all four competitions entered and face an old foe in the Champions League final in Paris. What's not to love?

'There is only one heroism in the world: to see the world as it is, and to love it.'

Romain Rolland

True love's ways

After the fiasco of Liverpool owners FSG's involvement in the ESL's pre-emptive 'launch' in April 2021, matters of politics and football ownership – and much worse – would soon return to haunt us all in 2022. But there were also rather more rewarding things for Liverpool supporters to enjoy. The arrival of a superior *fussball* trainer from Germany in 2015 had not only promised to save the club from a playing crisis, but also from the moral sewer. He was not the club's American owners; Jürgen Klopp was nothing like them, in fact. But FSG knew full well Klopp's value to the Liverpool boardroom, not only as a truly great football coach but also as a vital public relations shield when things got difficult. It was a point that regularly shone through in Klopp's expressed public delight with his job and with his players. 'I loved them before, but I love them all over again.' This was a typical outpouring of emotion about his team from a jubilant, spectacles-free, Jürgen Klopp late in 2021, those remarkable new choppers of his gleaming in the Anfield floodlights. Klopp was luxuriating in a very inexperienced Liverpool 3, Leicester City 3 (Liverpool win 5-4 on penalties) result in the League Cup quarter-finals on the evening of 22 December. A very late Taki Minamino equaliser had saved the day. Liverpool would now face Arsenal in the semi-final.

And there was absolutely no artifice here. You can see just how much Klopp (and this Liverpool crowd) is thrilled by the final outcome, a now familiar show of youthful resolve in adversity under the German. He fills the frame with unadulterated joy, a different man from the coach who was so haunted by personal and professional demons as his Premier League champions had spectacularly capsized in empty stadiums in season 2020/21. This is exactly what Klopp likes best, of course; a come-from-behind, underdog victory against stronger (and more expensive) opponents, with Liverpool academy talent at the very heart of it. And what other elite football manager has ever delighted in talking openly about his men in quite this way? Not Paisley or

Kenny, certainly – not even Bill Shankly himself. Absolutely not Rafa, Alex Ferguson or Wenger. Did Brian Clough ever publicly emote like this? I think he once might have said how much he *loved* his favourite winger, John Robertson, but that’s about as far as it went. Don Revie? Mourinho or Guardiola? A bit of expressive man love? I don’t think so.

Jürgen Klopp obviously enjoys inhabiting the fans’ world, because he relishes using fan idioms like this one, about *loving* his team. He still has a child-like fascination with the heroic nature of sport and for the collective passions for the game. In truth, he would rather be a fan than a coach. Soon after the Leicester win, Klopp tweeted: ‘If I’d known how special this football club is, and how much we mean to each other, I’d have wanted to be here much earlier. This club is absolutely outstanding.’ I ask you, what more can any coach say? And Klopp feels no need, as many other football bosses might, to remind you that he actually *runs* this whole enterprise: analyses every kick and tactical adjustment; recruits and inspires these global stars; gees up and protects the young Anfield wannabes. He is simply happy to be here, to have shared in this occasion and in other Liverpool triumphs with these players and these people, in this city and in this stadium. Even in a cup competition that he really has no great love for, Jürgen Klopp takes great care to mention in his post-match Leicester interviews every single young performer who has contributed something to this latest Liverpool memory. It is as if these players are his own sons – which, in many respects, they really are.

Klopp understands that the business side of football is necessary but, like us, he sees it mainly as an infringing blight on the sporting landscape. He visibly hated the ESL saga of 2021 and his club’s role in it, but he also understands the importance of finishing in the Champions League spots, even when all seemed lost in 2021. Klopp has no love of spending large dollops of cash on established players, unless he has already raised the means elsewhere. FSG are routinely in his ear on this matter. Having just bought up the Pittsburgh Penguins ice hockey franchise, the value

of the FSG empire late in 2021 had moved close to £8bn, more than one-third of which was now tied up in Liverpool Football Club. The Americans appreciated that Klopp had no time for high-priced celebrity stars, walking egos who might disrupt pay grades and profit, and poison the positive atmosphere in Liverpool training sessions and the dressing room. Even modest Brighton (and many other clubs) had spent more in net terms on transfer fees than Liverpool had in the past five seasons. In fact, Klopp enjoyed publicly chiding those journalists who insist at press conferences on asking searching questions about his relative lack of transfer activity. ‘Who do *you* think I should buy?’ he liked to retort. ‘Who is better than what we already have?’ Klopp welcomed, above all, the challenge of making stability, teamwork and collective resolve trump individualism and economic power. He and his staff have no interest in buying success. ‘We have a good feeling here. We know what we have.’ (His assistant Pep Lijnders often shouts *‘Together!’* as the Liverpool players run on to the field.)

So, while many of his close rivals were busy spending heavily in 2021, Jürgen Klopp was focused on signing up Virgil van Dijk, Alisson Becker, Jordan Henderson, Andy Robertson, Fabinho and Trent Alexander-Arnold on contract extensions. Bobby Firmino, Sadio Mané, Mo Salah and a few others would require more work. Keep members of the core group tight was the message. The only new arrival at Anfield in the summer of 2021 was Ibrahima Konaté, an inexperienced but towering 22-year-old centre-back from RB Leipzig, for £36m. Here was another development project for the manager and his staff – and the new man needed some work.

Okay, unlike us fans, Jürgen Klopp could quite easily jump ship in a couple of years, so planning for the longer term by building up our talent stock may not exactly be the first thing on his mind. Why should he care? Instead, Klopp was twinkling in August 2021 about holding on to what he already had and the future promise of a kid, Harvey Elliott, who had barely played top-level football at all (he was soon a long-term injury absentee,

kicked and damaged at Leeds). When asked if he expected talismanic striker Divock Origi to leave Anfield in the August transfer window, Klopp replied, smiling: ‘100 per cent!’ In fact, Divock stayed, some said like a horse stuck on an escalator. But Origi had plenty of credit in the club’s collective memory bank and he wanted to remain in this house, to share the same space, breathe the same air, as Jürgen Klopp (he would even score some crucial goals in the new campaign).

The Premier League outspent all of its European league rivals tenfold on transfers in the first post-Covid transfer window in the summer of 2021, but not Klopp or Liverpool FC. Not even with the AFCON championships due in Cameroon in January 2022, taking Salah, Mané and Keïta out of the club equation, mid-season. ‘We hold our ground’ was Klopp’s message. This was also a risk, of course, relying on a smallish, ageing squad, some marginal subs and a largely untried group of academy kids. But the injured would soon be returning and the Liverpool manager had earned both our trust and affection, so his judgement was worth fans’ support. After all, a bunch of reserves had seen off Leicester City’s first team in the League Cup. At least until things started to go badly wrong, we believed in all of this – and in him.

Watching the defectives

A white stag is found wandering the mean streets of Bootle as the new football season kicks off. Naturally, the Merseyside police shoot it dead, no questions asked. Was this some sort of veiled warning? Payback perhaps for England’s failings in the Euros in the summer of 2021 and the ugly racism that followed? Not for Jürgen Klopp. His sense of certainty and comfort in his own skin at Liverpool eclipsed England’s problems and the troubled managerial situation at both of Liverpool’s historic local rivals, Manchester United and Everton. For a few quid, a grifter sits outside Old Trafford today, happily photographing fans sitting alongside full-size replicas of the FA Cup, the Premier League and Champions League trophies. These tourists long for 1999

again, now only a distant dream. In 2021 their club is unsure whether Ronaldo's late goals or Pogba's occasional brilliance make up for this couple's gross lack of industry and general negative effect on the United coffers, match shape and team ethic. United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is a nice guy but he is a coach little acquainted with the tactics board; a man hungrily waving a fork in a world full of soup. So, Liverpool's visit to Trafford Towers in late October promises possible early season reward. Which somewhat understates matters, because by half-time, in a packed and largely mournful tomb of a crumbling stadium, Liverpool are four goals to the good. The Manchester 'faithful' are already trudging to the exits, as if on an unannounced mass fire drill. United seem stuck between press and no-press, with their full-backs all at sea, Fred on no-talking terms with the ball, and Bruno Fernandes and Ronaldo beseeching the gods for help. Keïta, Trent and Mo all have unfettered access to United's chaotic left side. After just 50 minutes Salah has already claimed a hat-trick for 5-0, before a frazzled Paul Pogba is early bath-bound for an assault on Naby Lad. All of which leaves half-an-hour for Liverpool to play keep-ball against ten men, classily choosing humiliation over total annihilation. Klopp calls it an 'insane' result, one widely reported as if a national tragedy. It is also a record home defeat in this fixture, a quite glorious day destined to be recorded for posterity in song (and possibly expressive dance) in the diocese of Liverpool 4.

Across Stanley Park, meanwhile, at the People's Blue Republic, turmoil is the usual order of the day. Boutique Italian manager Carlo Ancelotti has decided that a spell back in the Spanish sun at Real Madrid is a much better option than eating bacon butties in the rain on County Road and coaching Tom Davies and his pals. Who could blame him? Against all good sense and decorum, it is Rafa Benitez who has been chosen to become the first manager to preside at *both* Merseyside clubs since William Barclay briefly did so way back in 1892. Naturally, not all Evertonians are happy with this outcome. With a weak

squad, an ambitious owner, frustrated supporters and a grand new stadium planned for the Mersey dockside, here was a football job filled with both promise and jeopardy in almost equal measure. Seasoned Liverpool fans know enough about respecting Rafa to be assured that cold-eyed professionalism, rather than emotion or loyalty, always dictates his employment preferences and indeed his managerial style. What would Rafa have made of the reluctant Ray Kennedy as a prospective midfielder, for example? Could he have nurtured a late developer such as Roger Hunt to World Cup greatness and to become Elvis Costello's all-time Liverpool FC hero? Good questions.

Sir Roger has passed away, aged 83; Ray will soon follow at just 70, a double-winner at Arsenal and a goalscoring midfield glider and enforcer under Paisley from the mid-1970s. Both men were quality members of great Liverpool teams. Kennedy's physicality and languid movement in training reminded Bill Shankly of the boxer Rocky Marciano; Ray and Jimmy Case became chief dressing room pranksters under Paisley. For most of his life, Kennedy lived with the degenerative Parkinson's disease and later had to auction his medals and England caps to fund his own care. Sir Roger moved from World Cup hero back to his successful family haulage business on retirement, but even his heroic England team-mate Geoff Hurst ended up on the dole in the 1980s. Memories of these great Liverpool servants live on. Hunt got the late winner in a tight Anfield derby back in 1967 and ten years later Ray scored in the 3-0 FA Cup semi-final replay win against Everton, so both would have enjoyed this latest league encounter with the Blues under the Goodison lights in early December 2021. Rafa Benitez, not so much.

Following the mad public address sirens that traditionally start proceedings here, comes a brutal 4-1 neighbour's drubbing of a hapless Everton. The very first approving 'Rafa' chants heard at Goodison during this campaign actually come from the carnival that is soon aflame among the 2,902 Reds packed into the ancient Bullens Road stand. The Blue reply? *'Murderers!'*

Evertonians are not bad people, it is just that even in our low times we have had some glory and they have had precisely nothing. Which means self-loathing and some real hatred is on show tonight, on an evening punctuated by Liverpool excellence, missiles from the crowd, pitch invaders and a generally decadent sense of decay, anger and mutiny. A once great institution has gone to seed. As at Old Trafford, Mo Salah has his goals and with ten minutes left the home areas are near-deserted. The hosts on *Toffee TV* later look as if they are living a full-on mental breakdown in real time, describing their beloved Everton as ‘a ramshackle mix of garbage, a rubbish football club’ (don’t hold back, guys). Jürgen Klopp later reflects with the press on the occasion, about learning to succeed in derby matches and about playing angry, but in a football way:

PRESS: Why was this game such an important step up?

JK: Look, the two derbies for us, against Everton and United, are big games. And you have to learn to keep yourself calm and together if you want to play your best football. I told the boys when I looked back at the derbies at Goodison there was not one game when I said, ‘Wow, that was a great game, nearly perfect.’ I wanted us today to be really mature and, yes, very aggressive, but in a football way. Angry as well, but in a football way. You can’t counter-press without a bit of anger and a bit of greed. But there are moments when you just have to move and pass the ball, and for that you need a different mindset. That’s what we had tonight.

The very presence and assurance of Jürgen Klopp at Anfield has helped prolong these calamities, of course, but even he finds it difficult to make reason out of the total mess and the toxic atmosphere across the park and the fact that his team has now ruined *both* United and Everton away from home within a matter

of weeks. Surely, no Liverpool manager had ever completed this double in quite this extravagant way before? Both Solskjaer and Benitez would be gone in a matter of weeks, another first.

Europe calling – for Virgil and Trent

After a decent enough start in the Premier League, being drawn in the ‘group of death’ in the Champions League meant that Atlético Madrid, Inter Milan and FC Porto all lay in wait for Liverpool. Klopp smiles wryly; he already knows a key question in this campaign will be about the fitness of Virgil van Dijk. Is VVD the same imperious defender of 2018–2020, a man bored and disdainful of all opponents and totally secure? Or is this a reduced, post-injury, version of the Dutchman, a defender now playing too high and quietly afraid? Virgil himself seemed uncertain, not unreasonably asking for more time to get back to his maximum level. ‘I’m not a robot,’ he says, helpfully. A late developer, Van Dijk sees his delayed route to his summit role under Klopp as a ‘perfect’ journey: raised in Breda by a Dutch father and a Surinamese mother; rejected at the Willem II club while dishwashing twice a week; initially struggling at FC Groningen, despite cycling to work; acclimatising to Britain at Celtic Park with an added rehearsal in the Champions League; stepping up to a regular Premier League slot at Southampton under a demanding but compassionate Ronald Koeman; and then on to become the world’s greatest central-defender at Liverpool FC under this Svengali, Klopp. Van Dijk had found his people and his purpose – his destiny. His manager was also willing to wait and pay a premium for Virgil because Klopp knew what he was getting. And Van Dijk’s early assurance had allowed Liverpool to play what was effectively a front-foot 2-5-3 formation at home, routinely compressing space while overwhelming the opposition down the flanks. Right now, even if Virgil lacks the absolute certainty of his pomp, the ecosystem that is the Liverpool squad benefits from his calm squeezing of the game and his organisation of a near suicidally high defensive line. His serenity, pace and talent – and

the new judgement lines of the video assistant referee (VAR) – all allow Klopp’s men to live right on the edge of chaos.

A wild Champions League night in Madrid in October 2021 offers more clues about VVD’s rehab. After 13 minutes Liverpool are already two goals to the good against Atlético, sailing home. Except this is Simeone’s place of worship; absolutely nothing is given away here. Even before half-time it is 2-2, Naby Keita defensively culpable but with Virgil, himself, seemingly ill at ease against Antoine Griezmann’s movement and pace. Atlético’s second goal involves a simple right to left drift and reverse shot by the Frenchman, a move that the old VVD would lazily have countered without thinking. But here he seems unaware, on the half-turn, hesitant and lost. Worse, the Wanda Metropolitano is now rocking. Only Griezmann’s second-half red card and Mario Hermoso’s foolish off-the-ball lunge on Jota for a saving penalty, see Liverpool home. But not before some collective howling at the moon and general shithousery has demanded home redress. It is denied here by some unusually ballsy refereeing and Alisson Becker’s heroics. By the end, Mo Salah has his by now statutory two goals and the Reds have their eighth successive three-goal away haul in all comps. Nine points are already banked in the *groupe de décès* vault (Klopp will end up with a record full house of 18). Mo Salah is on a scoring mission, a man with the grimmest of Cairo accents, the full Egyptian Robbie Fowler. A smiling Liverpool manager later calls this anarchic victory in Madrid ‘three dirty points’. He enjoys a winning scrap. But he also knows that we may still need to talk about Virgil.

Without breaking the bank, in five years Klopp had developed a Liverpool squad filled with experienced world-class performers, but the German has a special soft spot for high-achieving local products, those kids he has watched, nurtured and honed into the Liverpool first team. His aspirant sons. For sheer god-gifted talent, every red shirt past and present is now routinely challenged by a young Scouser who was taunting Atlético. Trent Alexander-Arnold has been a Liverpool FC footballer from six years of age.

When he was four, Trent turned up to his local football hub and cried every weekend because the coach said he was too young to train. He did the drills at home instead; he was already driven. Like his exceptional full-back partner Andrew Robertson, Trent is a converted winger, a man given forward licence by Klopp mainly because of VVD's absolute security behind. I got my first close-up when Trent was just 18, playing for Liverpool's Under-23s on a breezy Monday afternoon in April 2017 at Holmes Park in the leafy Leicestershire countryside. Only a few hundred locals were present to see Joe Gomez, Curtis Jones, Harry Wilson, Neco Williams and others, but it was Trent who glowed. He had played a handful of first-team matches by then and already had the look of a classy, distracted slacker, a man waiting impatiently for his day. Just over three years later Trent had played in two Champions League finals, won one World Club Cup and a Premier League title, had played for his country, had his own street mural and was an acknowledged role model for Liverpool's black community and every snot-splashed kid in the red half of the city. (He had also taken the most famous corner kick in the history of world football.) From rural parkland to the very top of the pile in just three seasons. You might say Trent had arrived.

In early November 2021, facing Atlético in the group stage return fixture, it is Trent who kills the contest, delivering two daggers from Liverpool's right flank, first for Jota and then for Sadio Mané to drive home. Now sporting a jaunty Bob Marley mop, Trent looks so relaxed, one journalist remarks, that you half expect to see a surfboard tucked under his arm. He oozes calmness and class, a young man thriving under his German guide and the on-field tutelage of Van Dijk. He is a boy who, with his Anfield coaches, has uniquely reinvented the game at the very highest level, wearing a number 66 shirt and often dictating matters from the defensive right side. No kid in the city wanted to play right-back before this revelation – now they all do. His assist figures are scary. The young Scouser is even investing in a project to do more to help those young players rejected by clubs. In

short, he is the complete package. But, right now, Klopp and his staff will need to scout and sign players from the city and further afield without the input of Michael Edwards, the much-praised recruitment and analytics guru, who is leaving Anfield after ten largely successful years. Edwards refuses to say who his favourite Reds signing has been in that time but concedes that his dog is called Bobby. Don't leave us hanging there, Michael.

Day-trippers, yeah

'When you are younger you manage with less baggage. You nearly don't give a fuck.' Wise words from David Moyes, talking freely late in 2021 as the returned and experienced boss at West Ham United. The Hammers under Moyes have actually found their feet again, even beginning to love the gauche London Stadium. They also have a talented first-team squad made up of brutal giants. So, West Ham 3, Liverpool 2 in the Premier League on 7 November is always a possibility if VAR is against you, attitudes are wrong and corners are defended as poorly as they are here by Alisson Becker and his mates. It is a first Liverpool loss in 26 matches but the manner of it is concerning. It even means that ambitious West Ham climb above Liverpool to third in the table. Alisson insists that Klopp recruits the Brazilian Claudio Taffarel to aid with Liverpool goalkeeper coaching. Let's hope the new man has an A* grade in dealing with crosses under pressure. We need him.

This defeat at West Ham is probably more of an unfortunate inconvenience than a full-on disaster for some people watching from the front sections of Kop blocks 106 and 107 at Anfield. It is here where many Liverpool day-trippers gather. They group fortnightly and anew in excited animation behind the official photographers and some of those fantastic Kop flag bearers ('Never Trust a Tory' has just arrived), and also the Kopite wheelchair warriors, who have served their time but now have to endure home matches from bunker level in the wind and rain, often under plastic sheets. One of Liverpool's deaf stewards, Steve, works these sections; he is brilliantly efficient with simple sign

language and he always has a knowing smile. This is precisely the spot where many Kop-end Liverpool scorers end up celebrating, where diversity rules, merchandise bags overflow and half-and-half scarves appear. It is also where mobile phone cameras are at full pelt for selfies and those ‘I was there for one day’ precious memories of Anfield. It is all positivity and matchday spend, greedily banked by the club.

Drifting down pre-match from my own block 207 in mid-November, a young Glaswegian guy asks me to take his picture as the Liverpool squad warms up in front of us. As usual, Jürgen Klopp is carefully studying our opponents’ pre-match routines from the centre spot. What can I say? I take the Scot’s phone. Just yards from us, recent Liverpool ‘legend’ Stewart Downing is being interviewed pitchside for LFCTV. The very moderate Downing was actually in the last Reds XI to lose at home to today’s opponents, Arsenal, back in 2012 under early Brendan Rodgers. This current Arsenal team is unbeaten in ten and a symphony commemorating the Gunners’ title win at Anfield in 1989 is currently performing at the Barbican in London. These are all bad omens, of course. But recently the Londoners have hated it here, regularly taking a hiding. And so it unfolds today, another 4-0 surrender in front of the perpetually standing Kop. (Any chance of the occasional sit down, people? My legs ache.) As usual, Trent and Mo torture our visitors on the Liverpool right flank, complementing the intense counter-pressing led inside today by the Ox, Thiago and Mané. Diogo Jota makes hay again as Arsenal are swamped. Even Taki Minamino gets on the scoresheet as a late sub, joyfully mobbed by his pals right in front of Kop 106 and 107. The emotional reaction to this otherwise meaningless fourth goal shows just how much the Japanese is loved by his team-mates, by day-trippers, by Jürgen Klopp and by the entire LFC coaching staff, although this alone will not get him into the Liverpool first team.

By early December 2021, after a last-gasp Divock Origi winner at Wolves, Klopp’s Liverpool had scored more league goals

(43) than any club in the top five European leagues. And yet, and yet, they are still looking up the table at Manchester City, with Chelsea lurking nearby. Each of these rivals had already stolen points from Anfield. Careless draws with Brighton and Brentford have caused Liverpool further damage. This season is set up for a grand struggle, for sure.

Covid in the house

Also in December a new super-infectious Covid variant, Omicron, had begun stalking Premier League and European fixtures. This is not season 2020/21 but matches are postponed and Bayern are already playing in an empty stadium in Munich. What carnage lies ahead in England? Here's the answer: Curtis Jones, Virgil and Fabinho all test positive. Alisson, Firmino, Matip and Trent will soon follow. Even Klopp and Pep Lijnders will eventually succumb. Call the health police! Stop the clocks! Jürgen is commended by journalists for *naming* the Liverpool players in the first infection round, and the German writes a strong and responsible pro-vaccination message in his match programme notes about 'following the experts'. But perhaps, despite his leadership, it is already too late. Are all of our infected men even double-jabbed? (False positives are rumoured.) Players in England are reportedly well behind the vaccination rates for footballers in Spain, Germany and Italy. Fans fare little better: few people in the Kop concourses tonight are wearing masks, even though they have been explicitly instructed to do so. We are not yet out of these Covid woods, not by a long way.

Our opponents tonight (16 December) are Arab-owned Newcastle United, who five years from now, it is said, will be up there in the European places, perhaps even contesting the title itself. Enough Saudi cash can collapse time. But here they are the usual pallid relegation fodder under new man Eddie Howe, and a depleted Liverpool do just about enough to scramble home. Trent hammers in a late one from distance to wake us Kopites up and confirm a 3-1 Thursday night win. (Let's be honest, there is

nothing he can't do.) The club's hierarchy also announces today the historic formation of its new Supporters Board in the wake of publication of the national *Fan-Led Review of Football Governance* following the ESL debacle. The report calls for more supporter involvement and an independent regulator to ensure club licensing for greater financial sustainability. Good luck with that. But the *Spirit of Shankly* guys are all over this 'new direction' at Liverpool FC, so it could even get interesting soon. Meanwhile, we walk home past the giant girders sprouting up behind the Anfield Road stand for the latest ground extension. The industrialisation of elite football continues apace, with or without fans or its local communities.

Already well into his annual Christmas address to journalists about English football's unacceptably intense winter fixture congestion, for Jürgen Klopp, Spurs 2, Liverpool 2 in late-December 2021 is both a blast and a chaotic piece of sporting gibberish. Covid and other illness issues mean that Van Dijk is again missing and James Milner, the youthful Tyler Morton, and Naby Keïta are set up in a Frankenstein-like Liverpool midfield. This strange combination is never fully balanced nor in control in a high-paced, far-too-open contest. Morton is physically lost and Keïta is absolutely no help at all in this department. Milner toils; not even he can see off time. Klopp's famous 'rhythm' is sorely lacking here and Antonio Conte has already made a managerial impact at Spurs, filling the locals with both energy and belief. Andy Robertson, somehow, ends up with an assist, a goal and a red card. Later, Jürgen Klopp is justifiably incandescent about yet another dire refereeing/VAR performance; even Alan Shearer later on *Match of the Day* digs these guys out. A Covid postponement of the Anfield Boxing Day fixture with Leeds is soon secured but, with AFCON now looming, a hugely depressing Leicester City 1, Liverpool 0 post-Christmas let-down (the local idiots in absurd 'Feed the Scousers' form), follows on 28 December. Mo misses a penalty (we love Mo but I can tell you that all of us in the away end are secretly thinking: so near and yet so shit).

By now Manchester City are flying, eight points clear at the top, so winning at second-placed Chelsea in early January 2022 seems non-negotiable to sustain Liverpool's wilting 2021/22 title credentials. Covid-case Jürgen Klopp will be absent from the Bridge. Lucky man.

At 2-0 to the good in the first half hour (Mané and Salah), all seems perfectly scripted at Chelsea but, once again, the visitors are pulled back by half-time. A bad habit is forming. (Kovačić scores a goal here that he will never repeat in 100 years of trying.) Game management and the sort of defensive resilience that was second nature back in 2019/20 is now absent. Pep Lijnders highlights in TV interviews later what a 'thoroughly entertaining' 2-2 Premier League armchair spectacle this has been, as if this matters to us one iota. The current 11-point lead Guardiola and his petrodollar outfit has now established over skittish Liverpool (two points from three festive matches, three from four London visits) already seems improbable to breach. More salt in Liverpool wounds, City announce record revenues of £558m (up 17 per cent) for the Covid season, the highest in Europe. Their desert owners can do financial magic it seems. Even Klopp appears resigned, calling his rivals' current form 'ridiculous'. He knows that it may well take another 90-plus point haul to maintain this battle – and that his men may still end up short. It has not always been this hyper-competitive in the Premier League era; back in 1997 that coaching genius Alex Ferguson won the title for United with a frankly absurd 75 points. 'It's quite funny,' says Klopp, poking derision only at himself. 'I said it is impossible for anyone to play on both 26 and 28 of December, and then we lose to a team [Leicester] who played on both days!' Actually, it is not that funny at all. But it *is* typical Jürgen Klopp.

Thirty years ago, today

'Serbian cable-TV tycoon snaps up Southampton FC from Chinese in £100m deal.' Just another headline day in the 30th anniversary year of the global English Premier League. Closer to

home, Covid, injuries and our men away in Africa on AFCON duty all mean that Jürgen Klopp and his staff face a serious striker deficit, probably for over a month. In fact, Liverpool may not even have fixtures at all for a while because, with both senior coaches now in Covid isolation and the Liverpool AXA training base closed, Carol the Liverpool tea lady may soon have to manage the Reds' first team. We did field the kids in the League Cup, remember, when Liverpool needed to, back in 2019. It may come to that again. As a result, League Cup semi-final first leg away action against Arsenal is deferred. Is there no end to this contagion – or to elite football's manipulation of it? And then this happened:

13 January 2022: rearranged League Cup semi-final first leg: Liverpool 0, ten-man Arsenal 0. (I really don't want to talk about it; you can't make me.)

20 January 2022: League Cup semi-final second leg: Arsenal 0, Liverpool 2. (Arsenal had to come out to play and, when they did, Thiago, Trent and Jota (2) nailed them.)

Already in a major domestic final and rising majestically out of this fog of illness and uncertainty, in the first six weeks of 2022 Jürgen Klopp's record after a flood of league and domestic cup fixtures, played mainly without our star Africans as starters, ends up reading: played seven, won six, drew one. This alchemy means that, even lacking his top forwards, the German has taken Liverpool to a League Cup Final (against Chelsea), progressed to the FA Cup fifth round (via Shrewsbury Town and Cardiff City) and, in second place, has even snatched back some ground on Manchester City in the Premier League. Diogo Jota stands at 14 Premier League goals, second nationally only to the indefatigable Mo. Goals against Liverpool have also started to dry up, as Virgil has continued to find his feet alongside the outstanding Joël Matip. It has not always been pretty but Klopp and his men have defied logic and are still alive in all four competitions entered.

Even the darkest ESL days for FSG of April 2021 might yet be forgiven – by some. How short fan memories can become when the game is this entrancing. Moreover, in a winter transfer window in which desperate Premier League outfits are seen to trash £300m on players on ridiculous salaries who have already failed elsewhere, Jürgen Klopp secures, instead, the wondrous Colombian winger, Luis Díaz from FC Porto, a fresh wind to add attacking pace and aggressive trickery to Liverpool’s left side. With Harvey Elliott returning from injury at last, suddenly what felt like a depleted and ageing Liverpool squad has a youth injection and some very viable bench options. The impressive Díaz grew up in the impoverished Wayuu tribe of indigenous peoples in the small village of Barrancas (let me tell you a story of a poor boy, etc.). His arrival means new dynamism and hope abounds, just as a season of all possibilities is spreading before us and the San Siro is calling for a showdown with Inter Milan in the Champions League first leg round of the last-16. The ghost of Bill Shankly from 1965 still haunts these Italian parts.

Four routes to heaven – or hell

What exactly did Jürgen Klopp (and all of us) learn from Inter Milan 0, Liverpool 2? That this sort of top-end contest was a little too early, even for the precocious returning Harvey Elliott as a starter; that you can change the flow of a match, as Klopp did here, by using all five subs strategically, *if* you have a strong enough squad; that Ibrahima Konaté could yet prove to be the long-term answer to Liverpool’s future defensive needs; that VVD is close to finding his very best form again; that Luis Díaz will soon be one of Liverpool’s first-choice forward options; that attacking set pieces continue to be our friend; and that Klopp’s team (secure at the back and two attempts on target, two goals) will rightfully be feared by every other club left in Europe.

A come-from-behind, heavily rotated 3-1 league home win against Norwich City on 19 February has Kop patrons around us in disproportionately mad delight at a Mo Salah special and a

first Anfield goal for Luis Díaz, celebrated (of course) in front of Kop 106. We later get three fist-pumps from our jubilant coach. Why the carnival celebration for a scruffy win against these relegation certainties? Perhaps because we (or Jürgen) somehow anticipated that two hours later, as we are driving home, there will be news of unassailable Manchester City 2, Spurs 3, with Harry Kane reportedly pretty much unplayable at the Etihad. This minor earthquake means that a midweek Anfield win against struggling Leeds will further chisel the deficit at the top to a very plausible three points, when the gap had once been 14. All this becomes the focal point for some pre-Leeds, early evening red-hot soccer chat over a Shankly pie, mash and gravy in the marvellous community-run Homebaked Bakery behind the Kop on Oakfield Road, a regular pre-match haunt. It turns out to be great prep for Liverpool 6 (six!), Leeds United 0. Leeds fans may love their top man Bielsa but at this rate their favourites could easily be practising the Argentine's precious full-on philosophy back in the Championship (actually, Bielsa is sacked a few days later). Luis Díaz shines again and Matip and Virgil both score; a record 17 Liverpool players have now netted in all competitions. Klopp doubles his celebratory on-field fist pump action in front of us. Perhaps he really does know something.

Now, are you beginning to think what I am thinking? Because with every tantalising passing week, this Liverpool squad feels as if it could be on the very brink of greatness – or else possibly on the verge of total collapse. Nowhere in the world are people watching quite what we are seeing right here. Certainly not in Ukraine. Because the morning after the Leeds rout we are hit with news that beautiful Kiev (now Kyiv), the city where in 2018 we roamed among friendly locals in the spring afternoon sunshine before our first Champions League Final under Klopp, incredibly is now under Russian military attack. Newspapers carry pictures of local people huddled and sheltering for their lives in the same subway stations we once used to get to a football match. This is so very fucked up. In the least important detail of this criminal

invasion, it is announced that the 2022 Champions League Final will now be hosted by Paris and not St Petersburg. The despot Putin has already had his own home World Cup four years ago, of course, courtesy of FIFA. And so the world turns.

27 February 2022: CARABAO (LEAGUE) CUP FINAL – LIVERPOOL 0, CHELSEA 0 (Liverpool win 11-10 on penalties)

I will tell you a secret: we meet up in a bijou Harrow-on-the-Hill restaurant-bar hours before the season's first grand occasion, the Carabao (League) Cup Final. Even theatre director and mad Liverpool fan Phil Breen is here. This is my 23rd major Liverpool final attended. Fellow fan John Spiers has 32. Phil has only one – but impressively it is in Yokohama. These domestic finals are still special, so a pre-match sit-down meal seems right, even for we mortals, the fans. And although this is posh-city, we are only a few short tube station stops away from the madness we know awaits us. Liverpool have not won a domestic cup since 2012 under Kenny but we can still remember what it feels like and the seasonal lift it can provide. Or what defeat can do to morale. For our opponents, the Moscow apologist and Chelsea owner, Roman Abramovich, has been forced rapidly to transfer his 'stewardship' to the club's charitable foundation to avoid losing his billions and inviting other Ukraine-related heat. Not that many Chelsea fans will care for a second today what kind of vile kleptocracy has been funding their dreams since 2003. Over almost 20 years Abramovich has pumped £1.5b into Chelsea to win trophies and he has been completely unaccountable. He never speaks publicly, and it was Abramovich who opened up English football to the stench of shady foreign money and the kind of financial doping that now so dominates the elite game and indeed much of our public life. The Chelsea man will soon be sanctioned by the UK Government as a Putin henchman and Russian undesirable, and he will have to leave Chelsea under licence, its assets frozen, and in debt.