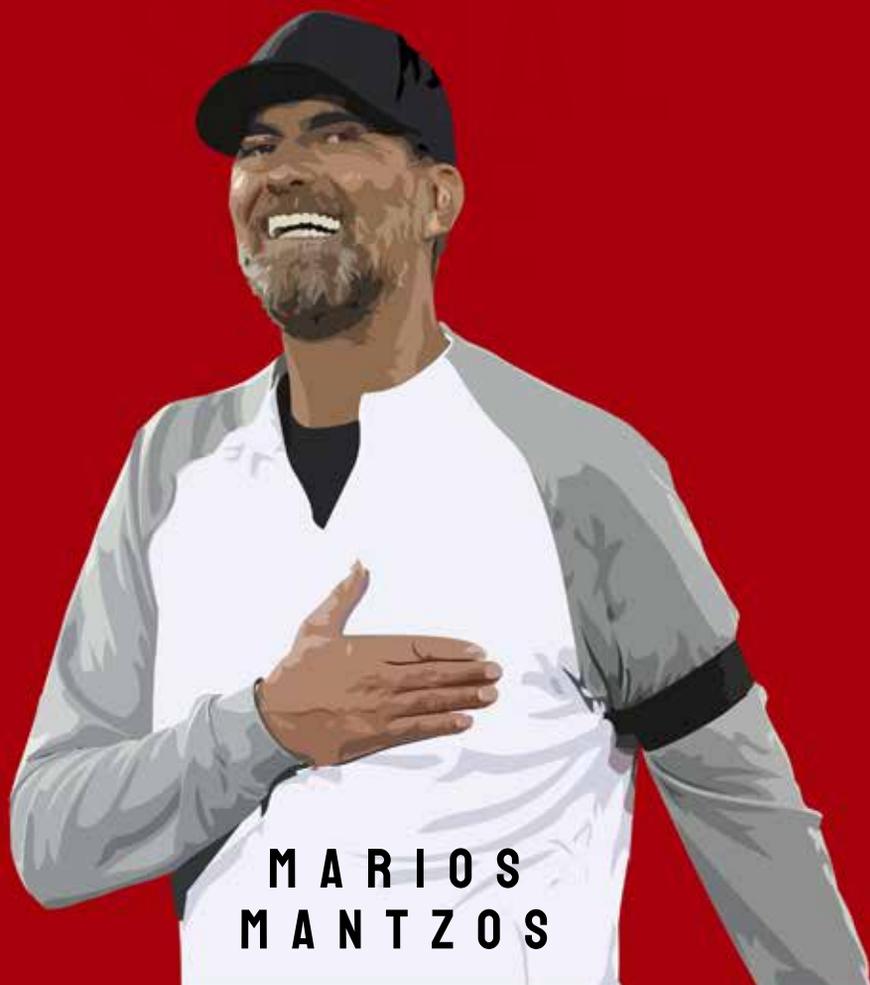


THE SOCIAL ONE

WHY JÜRGEN KLOPP WAS A
PERFECT FIT FOR LIVERPOOL



MARIOS
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I

From Doubters To Believers

*'From day one, he made everyone believe
that this would be a very special journey.'*

Steven Gerrard

THE 225TH Merseyside derby on 4 October 2015 is in progress and Liverpool are leading at Goodison Park thanks to a Danny Ings header four minutes before half-time. We are in stoppage time of the first half as Gerard Deulofeu crosses the ball into the Liverpool penalty area. Emre Can makes a poor clearance, the ball deflects off Martin Škrtel, and Romelu Lukaku takes the present and gives Simon Mignolet no chance, equalising for Everton. Liverpool lose their lead within a matter of minutes through a sloppy goal, highly representative of their miserable situation.

Nothing changed before the final whistle of Martin Atkinson sounded like the swansong for Brendan Rodgers on the Liverpool bench. The man who had come closer than anyone to exorcising the curse of winning Liverpool's

first league title since 1990 in 2014. Unfortunately, the Northern Irishman saw Steven Gerrard slip to allow Demba Ba to start the beginning of the end, which the Reds confirmed with a monumental suicide eight nights later at Selhurst Park, losing a three-goal lead against Crystal Palace within just nine minutes.

Liverpool had not since looked like the unstoppable team of 2014, as they said goodbye to their goal machine, Luis Suárez, who left a huge and unfilled gap on his way to Barcelona, one that Rickie Lambert and Mario Balotelli were called upon to fill. The following season Liverpool finished sixth, eliminated in the two domestic cup semi-finals by Chelsea and Aston Villa, knocked out of the Champions League at the group stages and saying goodbye in the Europa League round of 32 after a penalty shoot-out defeat by Beşiktaş. Rodgers' vision, after he had assured that the club would take more and more steps towards winning titles, not only did not materialise but was not even approached. The hugs between the players, the high-fives, the chest touches and the warm celebrations were lost in the misery to which Liverpool returned.

In that moment it was clear that the club was suffering from the lack of a long-term plan, with the journey of 2013/14 blindsiding many people. The challenge for the title was something that Liverpool had not objectively planned. They did it because it just happened to work out for them. However, it seemed impossible, especially as Suárez had gone, to be able to follow suit. Liverpool lacked foundations and did not show the slightest prospect that they could challenge for titles. Raheem Sterling

had already realised that and, no matter how much he annoyed and hurt the fans by heading to Manchester City in summer of 2015, everyone knew that profession-wise it was a reasonable decision.

Counting 25 years without a title at that time and with darkness on the horizon, Liverpool had turned into a unique phenomenon, the likes of which you could not meet in any league in the world. No matter how much you searched, even in the least commercial leagues on the planet, it is impossible to find a club with such a reputation and fame that did not win its domestic championship title for such a long time. And even though some big trophies such as the Champions League of 2005 and the UEFA Cup of 2001 arrived occasionally, the contact with the Premier League title remained only at the levels of sporadic flirtation, culminating in 2009 and 2014 where the Reds came really close.

The memories from the celebrations at Anfield in May 1990 with Kenny Dalglish at the helm did not in the least indicate that a three-decade drought was beginning on that sunny day. Liverpool were living with Hillsborough's wounds from a year earlier and the impact of the unjust loss of what was then 96 people on the club's soul was reflected in May 1989, when they lost the league title to Arsenal in the very last match and with the very last kick of the season. With a three-point lead over the Gunners, they just needed to avoid defeat by two goals or more. In the 91st minute, however, Michael Thomas made it 2-0 and Liverpool lost the title on goal difference in a heartbreaking way.

King Kenny's team reorganised, returned and won the championship in 1990 but Hillsborough's wounds never went away. Dalglish resigned in February 1991 and history draws a red line. Graeme Souness, Roy Evans, Gérard Houllier, Rafa Benitez, Roy Hodgson, Kenny Dalglish (again) and Brendan Rodgers tried, but no one made it. The 18 championship victories up to 1990 remained at 18 and the English title record-holders saw Manchester United dominating in the 1990s and 2000s, even surpassing them.

With Liverpool in tenth place in October 2015, seemingly without a specific plan, Brendan Rodgers proved not to be the legend who would bring the Reds back to the English throne. The Americans of FSG, who saved the club from the nightmare of the Hicks-Gillett ownership five years previously, were ready to give the hot seat of Liverpool to a new person. And this person would not have been a usual choice. The American owners, who were beginning to become acquainted with football, had to listen to the people of the city and look for the one that would best fit Bill Shankly's holy trinity: the players, the manager and the fans.

From Kenny Dalglish onwards, the blind trust and positive aura of Liverpool supporters for the manager had been missing. For those fans, the man sitting on the bench is much more important than the players. People are investing in him, the club does not change managers recklessly and it is no coincidence that, by saying goodbye to Rodgers, Liverpool were looking for just the 21st manager in their entire history. Liverpool's nature needed

something more substantial, because this club is destined to see football in a different way and to always remain attached to its own romantic mentality, being allergic to the cynicism of the money flowing into the market and the star players. Real Madrid, Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and many more abuse the capitalist model of modern football, throwing money away and breaking the Financial Fair Play rules. In Liverpool, a city that has never embraced capitalism as the prevailing ideology, the possibility of acting in a dynastic way and buying the best out there would hurt their pride, even if it seemed like a recipe for success, the myth of which would be demolished by the legendary armada of Claudio Ranieri a few months later. But Liverpool did not wait for the miracle of Leicester City to realise that romance does still exist. In Liverpool, romance never died. It adapted to the new reality but did not die. And in the face of the manager, people eagerly expected to see someone who would fit them and make them believe.

A lot of names were said to be in the race for the leadership of Liverpool, days before the announcement of Rodgers' departure. The United States national team manager and German legend, Jürgen Klinsmann, had little chance, even if the Americans of FSG would have loved it. Frank de Boer had an interesting project with youngsters in Ajax but was considered inexperienced. Ronald Koeman and Walter Mazzarri were also on the list but any interest in these gentlemen was maintained at the literary level, at a time when in practice FSG were already in talks with two specific men. Besides,

the process of looking for a manager did not start on 4 October but had been running for a long time. Therefore, there was enough time to evaluate the options.

Just a year after their duel in the quarter-finals of the Champions League, Jürgen Klopp and Carlo Ancelotti were standing at the starting line, this time for a job at Liverpool. The German coach was in the fourth month of his vacation after seven years of hard work and great success at Borussia Dortmund, having recently rejected the opportunity to take over the national team of Mexico, while the Italian legend had already turned down an offer to return to AC Milan in the summer in order to enjoy a break from football and fully recover from a neck operation.

Liverpool's interest in Klopp came as no surprise, not only because of his availability but mainly because it was not the first time. His door had been knocked on by the Reds in the spring of 2012, when Kenny Dalglish departed. However, it remained closed, as Klopp's agent made it clear that he was committed to Dortmund. And there was no reason for him to leave, as he was leading BVB to their second consecutive league title and the first double in their history. A club that had been on the brink of bankruptcy a few years earlier had developed into a football diamond with Klopp's proud seal, which should be taught at football seminars. The great German project, based on young players with desire to work and dedication, in complete harmony with the passion and support of the fans, was enviable. FSG saw in him a man who perfectly fitted the profile of Liverpool. At their second attempt,

they were much more likely to find Klopp's hand open and to be able to leave the team's keys there, mainly due to his availability, as Dortmund were no longer part of the working life of the then 48-year-old man.

On the other hand, Ancelotti did not need any recommendations. Winner of three Champions League trophies at that time, he had the status and personality to bring prestige to the Liverpool bench, and he would automatically strengthen the club's brand name and could attract big football names in the long term as well. In addition, Carleto had already worked very successfully in the Premier League, winning the double with Chelsea in the 2009/10 season, so he was familiar with the country, the style of football and the requirements to be successful in England. Ancelotti, therefore, was the best and most recognised world-class choice, although he would cost much more than Klopp. But there was enough evidence for the fans to believe that he could bring success back. However, the Italian was ultimately quite far from what Liverpool were really looking for and theoretically wanted to build. He was and still is a top-class charismatic coach but at that moment of his career he wanted something much safer than Liverpool could offer him: budget and management of a high level of potential. At Anfield, things did not work out that way. So, FSG paid all their attention to Klopp.

'I cannot forget the moment when I got the call from my agent that Liverpool were interested. I was completely in a holiday mood; we were in Lisbon with my family, but I felt the excitement inside. I couldn't immediately say:

“Yes! Let’s do it!”. I had to ask: “What’s your opinion?” I still remember both boys were like: “Yes!” We looked at Ulla and she looked at all three of us: “Oh, it looks like the holiday is over!” It was just a really nice moment to have it together,’ Klopp remembers.

In fact, it all ended well on 1 October when Jürgen Klopp travelled to Manhattan to discuss in private with FSG the possibility of taking over at Liverpool, following a first exploratory conversation that his agent had with the club’s directors via Skype a few days earlier. At the building of a law firm called Shearman & Sterling, the German coach met FSG owner John Henry, company chairman Mike Gordon and Liverpool chairman Tom Werner. The three men held a 60-page dossier that was a thorough study and analysis of Klopp’s philosophy, tactics and practices in his coaching career so far. Klopp, on the other hand, did not take notes with him, but showed that he was well read for the day of the interview. He presented in a very detailed way his vision for Liverpool, knowing facts, people and situations that only someone who had sat down to study well could know and process so accurately.

In Klopp’s mind, the possibility of taking over Liverpool was not a sudden scenario but a vision that he had been working on since he had left Dortmund. Based on the progress of his career, the next club would have to be a step up for him. In Germany, the only step up was Bayern but Klopp’s personality and character would not allow him to go to Munich, both because of their rivalry with Dortmund and the Bavarians’ philosophy that runs

counter to his own principles. So, either the Germany national team – in which he was never very interested – or something else. And in something else, Klopp knew both the league and the club.

‘When I met my wife, I saw her and thought, “Okay, I will marry her.” It was like that with Liverpool,’ Klopp told Sky Sports.

The approach to football and the atmosphere in Liverpool fascinated Klopp because he saw elements he had worked on and loved both at Mainz and Dortmund. In all three clubs, the passion for football is unparalleled and people live at the same rhythm, while the legendary ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’, written in 1945 and first performed by Christine Johnson for the musical *Carousel*, is sung by the fans of all three. In a friendly match at Anfield between Liverpool and Dortmund in August 2014, the image in the stands spoke for itself. Fans of both teams, many of whom had exchanged accessories before the game, sang the touching song, embracing each other, creating a unique atmosphere. That afternoon, Jürgen Klopp, as Dortmund coach, on the way to the pitch touched the ‘This Is Anfield’ sign, a move that did not go unnoticed and even today is interpreted as an omen. It was a spontaneous touch that meant a lot to him and even momentarily, as he revealed much later, he thought about what it would be like if he was permanently in this stadium.

In general, Liverpool’s ethos and mentality matched Dortmund’s in particular, and Klopp saw the Reds as the next step, not a club like Manchester United, who he

had dismissed a year earlier as essentially not sexy enough for him. And the Liverpool project was the reason that, during his holidays, he was trying to improve his English so that he could respond both to the interview, when it came, and to the work, if he got it.

‘He always said he didn’t study English but I’m pretty sure he polished it a bit. I could observe that he had. It was obvious that he’d go to the Premier League,’ Dortmund managing director, Hans-Joachim Watzke, told Raphael Honigstein for his book *Klopp: Bring the Noise*.

And his excellent English, about which he had long been concerned, enabled him to present fully and comprehensibly his project at that meeting in Manhattan. Among other things, however, he did not go there with the sole concern of gaining the trust of FSG. He went mainly to find out whether the Americans’ point of view ultimately suited him. A key parameter was the club’s transfer committee, which had been set up to mediate and help assess the players Brendan Rodgers wanted to acquire. In many cases, however, the Northern Irishman and the committee were in conflict, as its members wanted to have a much bigger say in the transfers, which led to Rodgers losing players he wanted and going with players he had as his last choice or not at all on his shortlist. Klopp was clear that he would have the first and last say in any transfers.

‘We talked about it for ten seconds. I am not an idiot. For me it is enough that I have the first and last say [in the transfers] – in the middle we discuss. But I need an exchange of opinions, because I am not a genius. I don’t

know much more than the rest of the world. I need other people to get the perfect information,' Klopp said at his first meeting with the press a few days later.

A few hour, with a short break for some sleep, were enough. FSG asked for some time to announce their decision. They had already made it. Klopp was taking a walk in Central Park when his phone rang. His agent Mark Kozycki and Liverpool's board had sorted out the contract details. Jürgen Klopp has officially been the Liverpool manager since 8 October 2015, just four days after Brendan Rodgers was fired.

* * *

Being now officially the new Liverpool manager, Klopp was well aware that his words acquired special weight. And already from the evening of the announcements, when he was called on to give his first interview as a Red on LFCTV, he was very careful to convey the messages he wanted, but also not be exposed over time. It is so easy to say big words driven by your excitement of taking over a new team. Klopp, however, did not even have these big words in mind. He acted with the same way of thinking at the press conference on the morning of 9 October, where he stole the show with his great humour and his very good English.

Summarising the content of the two interviews which spanned less than 15 hours, Klopp confirmed both how smart he is and how clear his vision was. In a miserable, nervous and very stressful situation for the team, he made sure to get people in the mood for the new era, but not in the

typical, political way of vague promises. He mainly referred to the foundations that needed to be laid, so that Liverpool could in the long term enter a trajectory of success; hence the fact that he used the term 'restart' quite a few times.

Leave history aside

The German knew where he was going. The weight of the Liverpool jersey and the glorious times of the past were in no way consistent with the 25 years away from the league title; however, this had evolved into a permanent curse, creating enormous pressure on the team. He did not refer to any great figure or any great moment of the past; he did not talk about history at all and invited people to do the same.

At the moment, all of the LFC family is a little bit too nervous, a little bit too pessimistic, too often in doubt. They all celebrate the game, it's a great atmosphere in the stadium, but they don't believe at the moment. They only want to see five years ago, ten years ago, 20 years ago. History is great but it's only to remember. It's only the base for us. It's not allowed that you take the history in your backpack. Not always compared with other times. Let's try to start anew. This is the perfect moment.

Forget the money

There had been much talk for several years in the majority of this club's fanbase that Liverpool consistently spent far

less money than the likes of Manchester United on player purchases and contracts and this was seen as one of the main reasons for their title drought. Many, therefore, believed that this should change.

Klopp had never worked with an enormous transfer budget. On the contrary, especially in Dortmund, things were marginal, but he himself managed with his skills and his project to create a great group of young players that went on to win two Bundesliga titles and reach the Champions League Final. It was obvious that in the Premier League the same recipe could not simply succeed without variations, as the difficulty of the league is much greater and there are many more contenders for the title. However, he made it clear from the start that the way the team should think should not be capitalist. ‘Stop thinking about money. Only football. I don’t want to spend money the club haven’t got.’

In squad we trust

‘I don’t want to have Cristiano or Lionel and all these players in one team. I want these guys. It was a decision for these guys.’

In a mix of romance and realism, Klopp turned everyone’s attention to the existing squad. Since he was taking over the team mid-season, it was impossible for him to make any additions. After all, he had not even trained his team yet to be able to address weaknesses and reinforcement needs.

In continuation of his words above, Klopp pointed out that what everyone should be concerned with was

neither when Liverpool would win the league again, nor which players he would bring in, but how the players of the existing squad could perform better as a group and play the way he wanted. The existing players also played a crucial role in Klopp's decision to take over Liverpool, as they had elements such as speed, passion and dynamism that fit perfectly in Klopp's 'full throttle football' as he himself characterised it.

I'm here because I believe in the potential of the team. I didn't see the team and think, 'Oh my God'... no, no, no. In this moment, we are not the best team in the world – who cares? We want to be the best team tomorrow or another day. That's all. What I saw from outside is absolutely okay. I saw some good matches and some not so good but it's normal in football you have some problems, you have to solve them. We have speed, we have technical skills, tactical skills, good defenders, good midfielders, good strikers, wingers. Now we have to see who is fit for the first game against Tottenham [0-0 at White Hart Lane] and then we have to make a team for this game, then we can start.

Give us time

The fact that Klopp distanced himself from history and, therefore, asked for time, does not mean he overlooked it. He knew what club he was in and that the real, ultimate goal of LFC was to find their way to trophies again. With

the last one dating back to 2012, the League Cup, it was a given that over the coming years Liverpool should return to title contention. And he did not hide in that thought either.

‘Please, give us the time to work. If we want, this could be a really special day. If you are patient enough. We can start in a very difficult league and in a special Liverpool way we can be successful. But we can wait for it. Not for the next 20 years, but, if we sit here in four years, I think we win a title, I’m pretty sure.’

But, most importantly, both he and the team needed a lot of time to build what everyone really envisioned. Patience is a virtue, but it is even greater in football and especially at a wounded club like Liverpool. The patience of LFC fans had obviously run out long ago but, at the given moment, patience was more necessary than ever. A long-term plan needs time, support and patience. Klopp said that and asked for it from day one. He promised nothing short-term, nothing immediate, taking care in a very subtle and gentle way to calm down those hoping for quick miracles.

‘Everything in life takes time. To be an adult takes time; to become a football player takes time; everything takes time. The only thing nobody gives time is development. If somebody feels they have waited enough for success – restart and then everything can happen.’

In Klopp’s eyes and smile you could see that something big was being born at Anfield. With the mediocrity of the squad performances up to that point, and with several teams many steps ahead of Liverpool, it was still unclear when you could expect practical confirmation of all this.

But that was not the priority. The priority was what, so simply and so effectively, Jürgen Klopp pointed out in the form of a political message: ‘You have to change from doubters to believers ...’