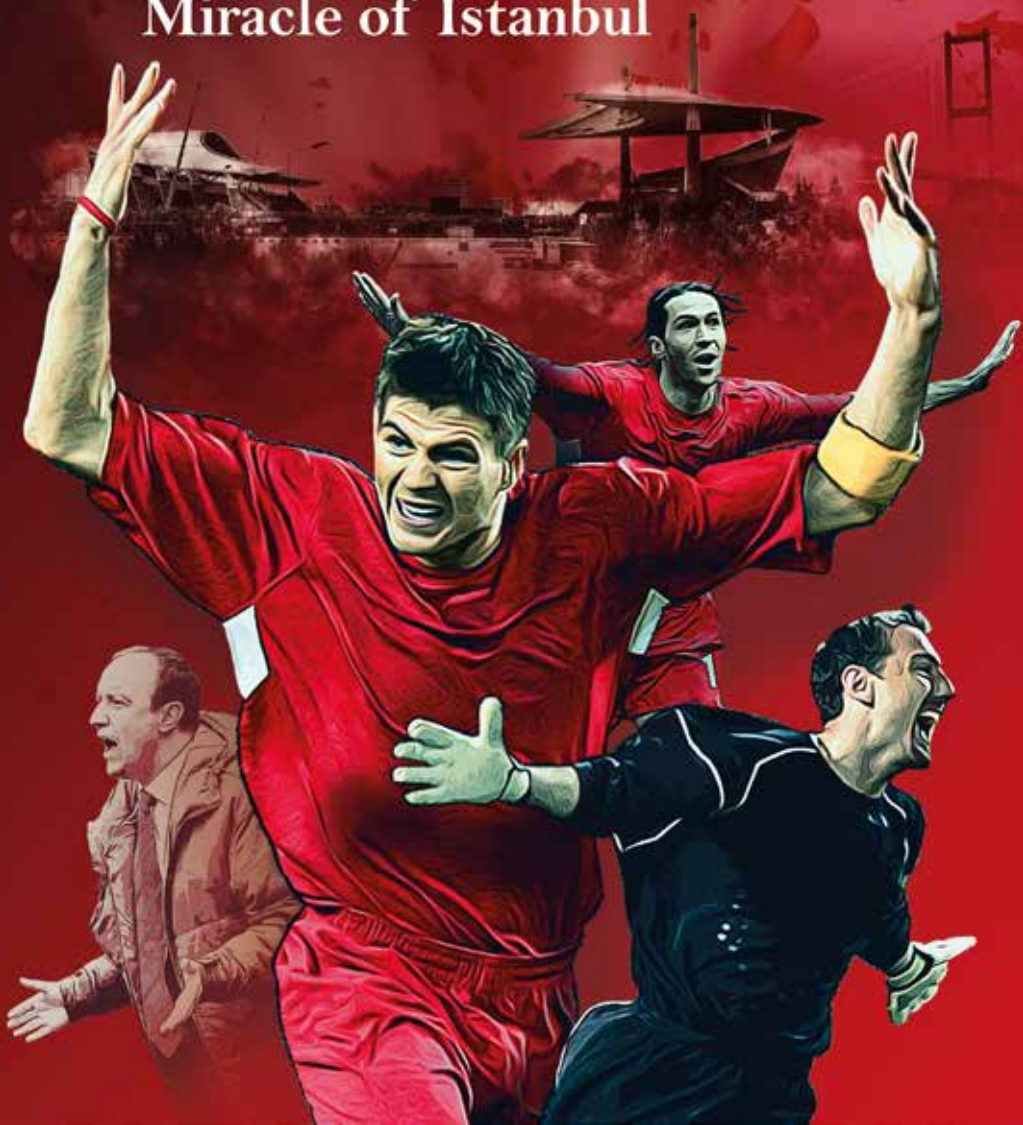


Steven Scragg

THERE ARE PLACES I  
**REMEMBER**

Liverpool FC and the  
Miracle of Istanbul



Steven Scragg

THERE ARE PLACES I  
**REMEMBER**

Liverpool FC and the  
Miracle of Istanbul



# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	9
Introduction . . . . .	11
1. Ged the Red. . . . .	21
2. All Hail the Rafatollah. . . . .	48
3. Self Grazification. . . . .	64
4. What Do You Want from Me? It's Not How It Used to Be . . . . .	89
5. Olympian Spirits . . . . .	98
6. Crown Court . . . . .	107
7. It's Eye-gor. Not Eee-gor. . . . .	117
8. Ruining Everything . . . . .	128
9. What a Hit Son. . . . .	138
10. Big Pharma . . . . .	155
11. Amicizia? <i>La Vecchia Signora</i> Gives the Cold Shoulder . . . . .	192
12. There's a Ghost in My House . . . . .	222
13. The Miracle . . . . .	247
14. Once in a Lifetime . . . . .	270
Afterword . . . . .	283

## Chapter One

# Ged the Red

CHRISTMAS 2003 was a miserable one for Liverpool. Sat ninth in the Premier League, 15 points adrift of leaders Manchester United, they were just eight points clear of the relegation zone, while the defence of their League Cup had already been ended when beaten at home by Bolton Wanderers in early December.

Sixteen league games into the 2003/04 season, Gérard Houllier's side had contrived to lose six of them, four of these defeats coming at Anfield; not only were Liverpool sat behind Alex Ferguson's reigning champions, along with Arsène Wenger's invincible-to-be Arsenal, Claudio Ranieri's suddenly rouble-rich Chelsea, and Bobby Robson's much-admired Newcastle United, but also the lesser lights of Chris Coleman's Fulham, Gordon Strachan's Southampton, Alan Curbishley's Charlton Athletic, and Steve Bruce's Birmingham City.

This was a Liverpool team that was the very epitome of inconsistency, one which would stumble two steps forward, stagger one back, and lurch one to the side all season long, in what was an almost shamefully successful mission to obtain Champions League

qualification, finishing four points ahead of the now equally dysfunctional Newcastle and an overreaching Aston Villa, yet a mammoth 30 points adrift of eventual champions Arsenal.

The Gunners' unbeaten league campaign had been a truly remarkable achievement, yet it was set against a backdrop of a poor collective Premier League vintage in which Liverpool, although rolling over the finish line in fourth, ended up three points closer to relegation than they did to the champions, this during a season in which they wound up only seven points better off than Bolton and Charlton, and collected four points fewer than they had 12 months earlier when finishing one position lower, in fifth. Liverpool's 2003/04 points haul was their third lowest since three points for a win had been introduced.

Across the span of the season, while there was no shame in seeing Arsenal complete a league double over Houllier's team, it was utterly numbing that both Charlton and Southampton would claim the same notoriety too, within a campaign where Liverpool's best winning run stalled at three successive victories and their longest unbeaten run stretched to just six games.

In the FA Cup, Liverpool were unseated in a fifth-round replay at Portsmouth on a day when Michael Owen missed a penalty with the scoreline still goalless, while in the UEFA Cup they were eliminated in the last 16 by a Didier Drogba-inspired Marseille.

Worryingly, Liverpool's response to being knocked out of the UEFA Cup was to win just one of their next five Premier League fixtures, the nadir being a 1-0 defeat at

home against Charlton on Easter Monday, a loss that left Houllier and his players only five points ahead of tenth-placed Fulham, with the west London side due next up at Anfield five days later for a game that ground its way to a lacklustre goalless draw, with this time Steven Gerrard guilty of missing from the spot.

Somehow Liverpool then clicked back into gear, picking up wins at Old Trafford and St Andrew's, sandwiching these awayday victories by taking three points at home to Middlesbrough. Combined with results elsewhere, bewilderingly it meant that Liverpool had clinched Champions League qualification with one game to spare.

On the final day it was back to general mediocrity, the curtain finally falling on a forgettable season with a 1-1 draw against Newcastle at Anfield, one in which Liverpool had trailed at half-time, and so uninspired where a significant number of those in attendance that they opted not to hang around for the customary end-of-season lap of honour.

For three players in red that afternoon, it was to prove to be the last time that they would play a competitive game for the club, not all of them moving on entirely by choice, as while we had almost knowingly witnessed Owen's departure unfold in slow motion for the previous 12 months or so, neither Danny Murphy nor Emile Heskey would have longed for their respective summer transfers to Charlton and Birmingham, at a time when both players were approaching what should have been their peak years, certainly in terms of age.

There would also be other reluctant departures that summer in the shape of the manager, his assistant, and an assortment of further coaching staff, with the curtain falling on Houllier's reign on 24 May 2004 after what had been nine days of deliberations and expectancy about a parting of the ways, ever since the Newcastle game had brought the season to an end.

As Liverpool supporters attempted to sooth their woes over the Christmas of 2003, it seemed incredulous to think that not much more than a year earlier the club had been sat at the top of the Premier League, unbeaten and momentarily seven points clear, with a third of the 2002/03 season almost navigated.

On 2 November 2002, Liverpool defeated West Ham United at Anfield, a 2-0 victory garnered by a goal in each half by Owen for what was a seventh successive league win, this on an afternoon when Gerrard's contribution was restricted to the final 21 minutes after he was introduced from the bench in place of the withdrawn Vladimír Šmicer.

Not all was as it might have seemed, however. Less than 72 hours earlier, a more telling representation of the underlying condition of Houllier's Liverpool had been laid bare at Anfield in the Champions League when facing Rafael Benítez's Valencia, just over five weeks beyond having been soundly dismantled by the same opponents at the Estadio de Mestalla.

In Spain, Liverpool had slipped to a 2-0 defeat on an evening when Houllier's side were restricted to just two significant opportunities, one in the first half when

Heskey was played in by Jamie Carragher – rounding Santiago Cañizares only to clip the far post from an acute angle – and a second-half chance that fell to Bruno Cheyrou in the penalty area after it was deflected into his path via a Dietmar Hamann free kick, only for Cañizares to be the equal of it.

On a night when Liverpool spent much of their time on the back foot, and defensive vulnerabilities were in sharp focus, Houllier's plans for the game were disrupted by Stéphane Henchoz's continued unavailability due to a calf strain he had sustained a week earlier, meaning that Salif Diao was deployed in central defence alongside Sami Hyypiä, only for the Senegalese World Cup star to be withdrawn at the interval, so tortured had he been by the effervescence of Pablo Aimar and bludgeoning presence of John Carew across the first 45 minutes.

While Houllier was backed into a corner in defensive terms, in the final third it was entirely optional when the decision was made to leave Owen and Milan Baroš sat among the substitutes rather than sending either of them out to start the game, with Heskey instead paired alongside the polarising figure of El Hadji Diouf. Just like his Senegalese compatriot Diao, Diouf did not reappear for the second half after Liverpool had been twice undone by the ruthless attacking incision of Aimar and the wonderful Rubén Baraja.

Composed, combative, fluid, totally at ease in possession of the ball and quick in all they did, Valencia were everything that Liverpool were not at the Mestalla, and by the time that the belatedly introduced Owen was



lamenting being denied a blatant penalty in stoppage time, the gig had long been up as hopes of a late comeback were sunk as soon as Hamann was flashed a second yellow card and subsequent red with just over ten minutes remaining, the German international having allowed his frustrations get the better of him.

Although it was nothing more than the opportunity of a lost consolation goal, even after Owen's penalty claims had been waved away by the myopic referee Herbert Fandel, Valencia were soon off down the other end of the pitch, where Carew should have made it 3-0 but was denied by the reactions of Jerzy Dudek.

In his post-match comments, Houllier tried to reconcile the gulf in class between the two teams, left as he was to surmise that this hadn't been the real Liverpool and that his players were in the dressing room busy blaming themselves. Benítez, meanwhile, was decorum personified, stating that his opponents were a great team, just one that Valencia had successfully stopped from showcasing their strengths.

The evening had an unsavoury edge to it in the stands of the Mestalla, to go along with the chastening night that Liverpool had experienced on the pitch: Heskey, Diao, Diouf, and Djimi Traoré were the target of racist chants from Valencia supporters, chants which numbingly rolled around the famous old stadium with an ugly regularity, events combined that left a bitter taste in the mouth of the visitors, one which would still be evident when the two teams went up against each other once again at Anfield just over five weeks later.

To accentuate Houllier's theory that the real Liverpool hadn't presented itself at the Mestalla, across the eight games that his team played between the two fixtures against Valencia they won seven and drew one, five of these victories coming in the Premier League, inclusive of wins against Chelsea, Leeds United, and Tottenham Hotspur.

Ultimately damaging in the Champions League beyond the loss in Valencia, Liverpool had dropped further points during a 1-1 stalemate at Anfield against Christian Gross's Basel, on a frustrating night when Dudek was beaten with the first effort mustered on target by the reigning Swiss champions, Julio Rossi scoring resoundingly against the run of play shortly before the interval. This after Liverpool had largely laid siege to the Basel penalty area throughout the first half, Baroš having belatedly made the breakthrough in the 34th minute.

Three times Liverpool hit the frame of Pascal Zuberbühler's goal, also finding the Basel goalkeeper to be in the most outrageously inspired form. Near misses, goal-line clearances, and a clear penalty denied them when a Murphy free kick was handled by Christian Giménez, having been outclassed by Valencia the draw against Basel was a case of a misfortune most ludicrous, with a hint of profligacy thrown in for good measure.

Dominant back-to-back wins against Spartak Moscow in October put Liverpool's Champions League fate back in their own hands, with Valencia to come to Anfield, and a trip to Basel to follow, giving Houllier's

team two chances to secure qualification for the second group stage.

When facing Valencia, it was a highly motivated Liverpool that spent 90 minutes banging their collective head against the brick wall that was Benítez's magnificently organised defence in a game that was settled by Francisco Rufete's deflected effort, which flicked off Hyypiä in the 34th minute, the ball deviating away from a trajectory that should have been easy enough for Dudek to deal with only for the Pole to be left stranded instead as it flew into his bottom-left corner.

This was a goal that undeniably stemmed from an excellent passing movement in which Liverpool were left chasing shadows, yet it was sealed with a finish that relied heavily upon good fortune. It would have been entirely in keeping with the game as a whole had Rufete's shot ambled past Hyypiä and rolled into the loving embrace of Dudek, a moment that was to be just another element of a shadow boxing goalless draw in the making.

On a fluctuating evening, at times Valencia were again the masters of possession while at other moments they were caught within a maelstrom in which a Liverpool equaliser seemed increasingly likely, at least until the determined and focused Heskey was perplexingly withdrawn on the hour and replaced by Baroš.

With Gerrard operating on the right of midfield, all too often finding himself isolated, John Arne Riise struggling to advance from his position at left-back, and Murphy suffering an off night, Owen was handed a

largely thankless task that was only to become ever more cumbersome after the departure of Heskey.

However, this time it wasn't a cast-iron case of Valencia clearly outclassing Liverpool, although there were intermittent periods when the visitors did leave their opponents second best in midfield, especially whenever Aimar dropped deep; instead it was a game of punch and counterpunch, both sides having spells where they looked the more likely to take control of proceedings only for the flow of traffic to switch once again.

This was a game where Dudek and Cañizares were made to work, although each effort they were forced to deal with – apart from Rufete's deflected goal – could be classed as saves they should have been expected to make, chances that conversely the prospective goalscorers should have done better with. From a Liverpool perspective Gerrard and Owen were handed compelling sights of the whites of Cañizares's eyes only to plant their shots straight at the Spanish international, while a stooping Hamann header was cleared from danger, and Baroš was denied with a late opportunity.

In the opposite penalty area, Kily González clipped Dudek's crossbar with what appeared to be an attempted cross, and Baraja hastily ballooned a chance high into the Kop from six yards when closed down rapidly by Dudek, before the Liverpool goalkeeper also saved comfortably from Carew when the linesman's flag should have been raised for offside, a juxtaposition to an incident at the other end when Owen broke free on the left-hand side

of the Valencia penalty area to bear down on Cañizares, only for the flag to be raised erroneously.

Baraja was to pass up on another opportunity during the second half, while Miguel Ángel Angulo stung the palms of Dudek from distance, yet in truth, the one goal aside, there wasn't a single true moment of peril at either end and Benítez must have been relieved as well as confused when he saw Heskey's number being lifted high by the fourth official, at a time when Liverpool had their most impressive spell of momentum rolling and the England striker had assumed the role as his team's chief facilitator.

A niggly game at times, animosity constantly bubbled beneath the surface, some of it lingering sentiment from Hamann's sending off at the Mestalla, and the still-incensed lynchpin of the Liverpool midfield was lucky to avoid a yellow card during the first half with Diao another to escape what would have been a warranted sanction, while for Valencia there were multiple occasions when Aimar should have been brandished a yellow, and David Albelda would have had no recourse to complain had he received a second caution and his marching orders for a lunge on Cheyrou, who had been thrown on in place of Carragher for the last ten minutes, an alteration by Houllier that saw Gerrard end the evening at right-back when his team was desperately in need of his inspiration in central areas instead.

Added to this negative chemistry, yet another ingredient to the simmering uneasy mood on the pitch between the two teams had been supplied by Carew

during the build-up to the game when he successfully cast himself the villain of the Anfield piece with his pre-match comments that Liverpool would struggle to put themselves among the leaders of La Liga if they were playing their league football in Spain, and that Houllier's side were nothing more than a one-man team. It was with an admirable flourish of shithousery that Carew added by promising to score at Anfield, even ruffling Owen's hair when they passed one another during the handshakes prior to kick-off. He might not have got his goal, but Carew enjoyed the last laugh by being on the winning side.

As Houllier and his players limped away from this second loss to Valencia and on into the beginning of November, they at least had the solace that Benítez's team was still the only one to have inflicted defeat upon them so far during those opening months of the 2002/03 season and their immediate reaction was to win their next two domestic games, picking up three more Premier League points with a 2-0 victory against West Ham and then beating Southampton 3-1 to reach the fourth round of the League Cup, with both successes coming at Anfield.

But then came the defining on-pitch pivot of Houllier's aspirations, as within three days leading toward mid-November Liverpool's unbeaten start to their Premier League campaign came to an end in uninspiring circumstances at the Riverside Stadium against Middlesbrough, and a tumultuous 3-3 draw at St. Jakob Park with Basel marked their exit from the Champions League. It was to be a twin blow that

would start the clock ticking on the endgame stretch of Houllier's Anfield reign.

At Middlesbrough, against a team who were enjoying their own fine start to the season on home soil but labouring on their travels, Houllier opted for an overly cautious approach, a lack of boldness that only resulted in Liverpool becoming progressively more negative as the afternoon wore on, until a glaring and costly error from Dudek gifted the only goal of the game to Gareth Southgate.

Three days later in Switzerland, Liverpool calamitously found themselves 3-0 down within 29 minutes against Basel, Houllier uncharacteristically throwing caution to the wind this time as he again got the balance of his approach to the game wrong, an expansive line-up finding itself cut to shreds by Gross's almost over-prepared players.

Gross had spirited his squad away to the Black Forest for an intensive training camp ahead of the clash with Liverpool, where alongside their regular doses of stamina and ball work they were subjected to a gruelling menu of watching endless videos of Houllier's team, followed by lectures and tests to see just what they had absorbed from these classroom sessions.

Less than half an hour in, the payoff for Basel's meticulous groundwork was writ large, as a punch-drunk Liverpool were left reeling from the goals scored by Rossi, Giménez, and Timothée Atouba, the initial breakthrough coming in only the second minute, as Gross's team grasped the nettle in spectacular fashion, showing no

signs whatsoever of tentatively playing for the draw that would be good enough for them to progress.

Three goals adrift at the interval, Houllier stunningly withdrew an admittedly out-of-sorts Gerrard, replacing him with Diao, and while it was a massively contentious switch, collectively Liverpool did eventually click into gear, dragging themselves level at 3-3 thanks to goals from Murphy, Šmicar, and Owen, only to fall narrowly short of a place in the second group stage that on paper had looked theirs for the taking when the draw was made.

This was 90 minutes of chaos, wild swings that exposed the fragilities that lay beneath the surface of Liverpool's defence, yet an hour and a half that also demonstrated their potential powers of recovery when finding themselves in a desperate situation and the handbrake of caution was finally removed.

Clawing their way back to just a goal behind Basel when Murphy and Šmicar struck within three minutes of one another from the hour mark, with 27 minutes left in which to complete their attempted comeback Liverpool slipped back into a misfiring mode, Owen's equaliser not coming until the 85th minute and even then only after converting the rebound of a penalty he had seen saved by the again inspirational goalkeeping of Zuberbühler.

Fine lines and narrow margins: Liverpool had come close to pulling off a great escape act but the position they had found themselves in, both in terms of that evening in Basel and the wider landscape of Group B, was that their fate had been entirely of their own making, and in



failing to beat either Basel or Valencia home or away, it was also totally deserved.

In many respects, the routes taken at the two most pronounced forks in the road for Liverpool in Basel were dictated by the two respective goalkeepers, as big shot-stopping first-half moments came when Houllier's team trailed 1-0, where an outstretched Zuberbühler managed to palm away a powerful effort from Heskey on to his crossbar from where it bounced away to safety, followed down the other end at 2-0 when Dudek's one-handed save from a rasping free kick by Hakan Yakin was parried not away and to his right but instead diagonally toward the angle of his six-yard box, where the perfectly positioned Atouba was able to take advantage, guiding the ball past the despairing Pole for 3-0.

On the back of his costly error at Middlesbrough, Dudek was suddenly under greater scrutiny and the worst was yet to come for him, while collectively the wheels didn't just begin to wobble for Liverpool, they spectacularly flew off as that first Premier League reversal of the season at the Riverside was to stunningly be the opening gambit in a run of 11 league games without a win, with Dudek suffering his personal nadir at the start of December when inexplicably and embarrassingly allowing the ball to run through him, handing a regularly profligate Diego Forlán his moment of iconography for Manchester United, events that resulted in Houllier's goalkeeper losing his place to Chris Kirkland.

From being sat comfortably atop the Premier League in November, two months later, when Liverpool walked

out at St Mary's to finally put their winless league run to an end against Southampton, they had dropped down to seventh, one place behind Everton.

A soaring take-off followed by a steep nosedive; Liverpool's league form eventually levelled out enough for them to put themselves in the running for Champions League qualification as the 2002/03 season drew toward its climax. The victory over Southampton began a run of 13 league games from which Houllier's side gleaned nine wins, a span of time in which they also triumphed in the 2003 League Cup Final, defeating Manchester United on a day of redemption for Dudek at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff.

This represented some much-needed better form, but it was still a spell in which mishaps bubbled to the surface as during this time Liverpool were tipped out of the FA Cup in a fourth-round replay at Anfield by a mid-table First Division side Crystal Palace, opponents who had not won a league game since the start of the new year. They also dropped into the UEFA Cup but those hopes were also ended on home soil, this time by Martin O'Neill's Celtic.

With two league games remaining, a Champions League place was Liverpool's to claim, but in their penultimate fixture Houllier was to be haunted by a man who he passed on the option to sign on a permanent deal a year earlier, after a promising five-month loan from Paris Saint-Germain.

Nicolas Anelka's two late goals for Manchester City at the Kop end were a hammer blow, not only turning a

winning position for Liverpool into a defeat in their last home game of the season but also delivering Houllier the perfect riposte to the snub the former Arsenal and Real Madrid striker had suffered when a proposed full-time transfer to Anfield fell through.

A week later, another loss sustained, another lead squandered: Liverpool were beaten at Stamford Bridge by Chelsea, the west Londoners instead clinching Champions League qualification. They were soon to be acquired by Roman Abramovich, with the whole vista of English football upon the eve of immense landscaping.

A turbulent season, 2002/03 had started with such hope and potential for Liverpool only for it to self-destruct as winter began to make itself felt; an excellent foundation was too easily torn asunder and so much of this violent regression felt unnecessary. Houllier's summer 2002 transfer activities were swiftly to become a millstone around his neck that was repeatedly brought into pre-match pub discussions and on post-match radio phone-in shows, while journalists grew increasingly scathing with Glenn Moore, in his post-season review in *The Independent*, lambasting the Anfield efforts of what he declared to be a team that had cost £80m to assemble, and were reputedly the highest-paid collective in the Premier League.

At Stamford Bridge, the 90 minutes that unfolded against Chelsea projected an unerring synopsis of Liverpool's Premier League campaign as a whole, with the pleasing start of scoring the opening goal being enveloped by a lamentable middle section and a frustrating finale

that was even presented with the top hat of a red card being brandished at Gerrard.

Defeat to Chelsea and the subsequent loss of Champions League football for 2003/04 was basically a form of relegation from UEFA's top table, a costly failure for Liverpool of an estimated financial hit of a projected £15-20m, at a time when chairman David Moores and his chief executive Rick Parry were openly courting avenues of fresh investment.

Stamford Bridge was merely the culmination of a series of careless events, as while there had been two defined periods of the season where Liverpool had found rich seams of prosperity, there was simply no avoiding the fact that that 11-game run without a league win and their worst home record for almost half a century were the overarching reasons for them falling short of the minimum requirement for continued expansion, in obtaining Champions League qualification.

It had all been so different 12 months earlier when Liverpool ended 2001/02 by reaching the 80-point barrier, finishing ahead of Manchester United for the first time in the league for 11 years, albeit still seven points adrift of champions Arsenal, while also impressing during a run to the quarter-finals of the Champions League.

Still, despite the relative merits of Liverpool's progress during 2001/02, there were caveats at play, with critical analysis often deeming Houllier's style of play to be too defensive-minded or too counterattacking, assessments that made their second-leg capitulation at the BayArena against Bayer Leverkusen in the Champions League

quarter-final completely perplexing, on an evening when they conceded three times in the last 27 minutes, the withdrawal of Hamann on the hour certainly not helping the outcome.

A tale of what might have been; Houllier had admirably insisted that his team stood just ten games from greatness as the firing pistol was sounded on the 2001/02 run-in, only to see Arsenal put in a faultless Premier League sprint finish to claim the prize, part of an incredible unbeaten run from Wenger's team that stretched across their last 21 league games in which they dropped only six points from a possible 63, beginning with a victory at Anfield just before Christmas, whereas across the same span of fixtures Liverpool dropped 19 points.

More damagingly for Liverpool's hopes, however, was their nine-game Premier League run from early December to late January in which they picked up just one win, essentially a prototype for their 2002/03 stretch of 11 league games without a win, while it could also be argued that their second-half unravelling in Leverkusen was to be the perfect pointer for the first half Basel inflicted upon Houllier's defence that following season. In this respect, it was ironic that what was billed as Liverpool's strength, their defensive strength, was to be their weakness two seasons running in the Champions League.

Timing is everything in football, and for Liverpool in 2001/02 they too put in a magnificent run-in once they had returned to winning ways in the Premier League,

claiming three points at Old Trafford, in what was the second act of a triumvirate of Danny Murphy-clinched victories at the home of Manchester United, a win that set in motion the accumulation of 41 of a possible last 45 points.

Fortune simply failed to smile upon the 2001/02 Liverpool when it came to the Premier League, the 80 points they gained having been the same number with which Alex Ferguson's side had been crowned champions 12 months earlier, and more than the tallies with which United had prevailed in 1996/97 and 1998/99, with Arsenal's 1997/98 total also weighing in in the upper 70s.

In a tantalising glimpse of what could have been, Liverpool's Premier League sliding door was complimented by the Champions League one with Lúcio's 84th-minute clincher for Leverkusen denying Houllier and his team a two-legged semi-final shot at a Manchester United team they had completed a league double over that campaign. Rather than being viewed as a double disappointment, the mood music spoke of looking toward going one step further the following season.

While 2001/02 was ultimately all about the narrow shortcomings of Liverpool, it was utterly ludicrous that they came so close to such big moments in the Premier League and Champions League at all given the events at Anfield on 13 October 2001.

David O'Leary's Leeds United were the visitors for a fixture to a rivalry that had been reawakened in recent seasons, with both teams enjoying something of a renaissance, bringing with it a competitive edge that

hadn't consistently existed in games between the two clubs since the mid-1970s when the legendary Shankly-Revie duels would often dictate the destiny of the big prizes.

Leeds had been the opposition on the day that Houllier first led Liverpool on a solo basis, after the departure of Roy Evans had ended their short and bewildering co-management of the club, and across the span of the 1999/2000 and 2000/01 seasons Houllier and O'Leary had traded Champions League qualifying blows with one another, sharing some epic Premier League encounters, inclusive of that stunning Mark Viduka-inspired 4-3 defeat at Elland Road.

On this occasion, however, neither team were clicking into gear as the first half became littered with poorly directed passes and the regular sound of an unnecessarily overactive referee's whistle, the monotony of the footballing fayre punctuated only by Harry Kewell opening the scoring with the aid of a deflection.

It was in the Liverpool dressing room at the interval where matters took a dramatic turn as, having complained of chest pains, Houllier, rather than returning to the touchline for the second half, was instead rushed by ambulance to the Royal Liverpool Hospital at the insistence of the club doctor, Mark Waller, whose swift actions were crucial.

Upon assessment at the Royal Liverpool, the gravity of the situation soon became apparent and Houllier was transferred to Broadgreen Hospital's cardiothoracic unit, where he underwent an 11-hour operation to replace a section of his dissected aorta.

The news shocked Merseyside and beyond, bringing with it on one hand great concern for Houllier's health and wellbeing, with his very mortality brought into initial doubt, and on the other hand uncertainty for the Liverpool players and coaching staff.

Thankfully, the operation was deemed a success, and for the next five months Phil Thompson ably stood in as caretaker manager, with Houllier soon offering pointers during his convalescence. After much external conjecture over whether or not Houllier would be able to return to his role, he eventually slipped out of the Anfield tunnel and into the welcoming embrace of Fabio Capello in mid-March when Roma arrived for their decisive Champions League second group stage game, when a place in the quarter-finals was the prize being fought over.

During Houllier's absence he was still clearly active in pulling strings, with the £12m sale of Robbie Fowler to Leeds at the end of November and three weeks later that loan arrival of Anelka, alongside the signing of Baroš from Banik Ostrava, plus the surprise late-January purchase of Abel Xavier from Everton.

Any thoughts that Houllier's health scare would slow him down were soon dispelled, and if anything, when he did return to his post on a full-time basis it seemed as if it was with even greater intensity than before, which was perhaps the key to his eventual downfall at the end of the 2003/04 season.

Going into 2001/02, Houllier's Liverpool were in excellent condition, a club rejuvenated from the rut they had found themselves within as they headed into



the summer of 1999. The cup treble of League Cup, FA Cup, and UEFA Cup in 2000/01 had exceeded all hopes and expectations, complimented as they were by pipping Leeds to Champions League qualification on the final day away to Charlton Athletic.

Suddenly, this was a Liverpool that had reacquainted themselves with the thrill of the chase for honours, and the 2000/01 run-in really felt like Houllier had turned back the clock to the glory days of Shankly, Paisley, Fagan, and Dalglish, days that were beginning to drift into an increasingly sepia-tinged past, mocked as we were by rival supporters for an increasing fixation on our history given that our contemporary efforts had been so lacking.

When we made the trip to Cardiff for the 2001 League Cup Final, it was in ungainly fashion that Liverpool took the trophy via a penalty shoot-out against First Division Birmingham City. An awkward success, but one that was embraced enthusiastically by those decked out in red, this was only Liverpool's third major honour since the resignation of Kenny Dalglish a decade earlier.

The aesthetics of the win over Birmingham aside, beggars couldn't be choosers, and after six years without a major trophy, the taste of success was infectious as Houllier and his players swept to the FA Cup and UEFA Cup finals too, returning to Cardiff to ram-raid Arsenal in the final few minutes of the former and being pushed all the way by Deportivo Alavés in the latter to a late Golden Goal, extra-time winner in Dortmund.

With Charity Shield and UEFA Super Cup successes obtained against Manchester United and Bayern Munich

respectively, added in August 2001 to the cup treble that had been completed in May, it was with a sense of ruthlessness that Houllier soon replaced his goalkeeper Sander Westerveld with not one, but two alternatives, in Dudek and Kirkland, while Robbie Fowler made that departure to Leeds.

Driven, newly successful, and merciless, Houllier had worked a swift miracle in turning Liverpool's fortunes around from the sorry state they had appeared to be in at the end of the 1998/99 season as they limped to a seventh-placed finish in the Premier League and headlong into a summer in which Steve McManaman left on a Bosman-facilitated free transfer to Real Madrid.

In the summer of 1999, McManaman was followed through the Anfield exit door by other significant squad members: David James, Rob Jones, Paul Ince, Øyvind Leonhardsen, and before long Karl-Heinz Riedle too, as well as the oft-maligned Bjørn Tore Kvarme, with Steve Harkness and Jason McAteer having already been moved on. In a sweeping of the decks, among others, Houllier recruited Westerveld, Hyypiä, Henchoz, Hamann, Šmicer, Titi Camara, Erik Meijer, and into the new year, Heskey too.

Even in the lead-up to the cup treble campaign itself, and also during it, Houllier was bold in his rebuilding plans, with Brad Friedel, Stig Inge Bjørnebye, Steve Staunton, Phil Babb, Dominic Matteo, and David Thompson all either cashed in on, or cut loose on a free transfer, while the manager proved he wasn't fazed at all by the concept of quickly letting go of players

he himself had signed, when Camara and Meijer were sold, as was one of Houllier's very early signings, Rigobert Song.

To offset this latest swathe of departures, in came Markus Babbel, Christian Ziege, Gary McAllister, Bernard Diomède, Igor Bišćan, Jari Litmanen, and explosively, Nick Barmby, sourced from just across Stanley Park, snatched from the clutches of Everton after he had been part of Kevin Keegan's England squad at the 2000 European Championship finals.

That Houllier managed to deliver the trophies he did while within the eye of such an intensive period of squad regeneration represented a project at Anfield that was way ahead of its anticipated plotline, which while absolutely glorious for Liverpool and their jubilant supporters, simply meant that expectations escalated to ultimately unattainable levels.

When Houllier was unable to deliver the dream of Premier League or Champions League glory during 2002/03 and 2003/04, even the fact he almost lost his life while on duty was not enough for either the club or a sizeable section of the support to maintain their once unshakable faith in him.

Clear backward steps were made and Houllier's decision making started to be questioned more and more, bringing with it a critical scrutiny that came into ever-sharpening focus as results took a turn for the inconsistent, a situation that eventually led to his departure in May 2004, thus paving the way for the arrival of Rafael Benítez.

Houllier had shown everyone associated with Liverpool a glimpse of the promised land, with the cup treble of 2000/01, and then positioning the club ten games from greatness the following season. He had been bold with that infamous statement during the run-in of 2001/02, and although the quote was used to mock Houllier over the years to come, he wasn't actually wrong in voicing his sentiment toward the possibilities in front of his team, a sentence he actually uttered with the word 'hopefully' as its precursor.

For Liverpool's supporters, and surely for the players too, after two years largely stuck in reverse gear between the summers of 2002 and 2004 the wounds of the regression of the team from the high levels of belief and potential it was riding two years before the exit of Houllier and the arrival of Benítez were undeniably festering. There was deep sadness over the way things had drifted under Houllier across his last two seasons at Anfield, but the feeling that it was time for change was overpowering.

In essence, the Houllier era was an intricate five-part saga, from his short partnership with Roy Evans, onward to the regeneration and modernisation of the club with Phil Thompson as an assistant who was able to keep everything grounded in the tradition that was the fabled Liverpool Way, followed by the cup treble season, before his health issues of October 2001 marked a sweet and sour divergence that ran until the November of 2002, from when regression then stunningly began to take root, the germination of which came at a time when Liverpool were sat atop the Premier League.

After the highs of May 2001, anything seemed possible for Houllier and Liverpool, and while it was painful that Arsenal remained one step ahead in the 2001/02 Premier League title race, and as disappointing as the Champions League quarter-final second leg unravelling in Leverkusen was, these near misses had an air of a dress rehearsal and most of us were philosophical about them, because we felt like such successes were merely being delayed for now, a theory that was only given more legitimacy by a fine start to the 2002/03 Premier League campaign.

From November 2002 onward, however, when the wheels began to come off, it was a case of the promised land drifting out of reach once again, and after we had seemed within touching distance of it those near misses of 2001/02 began to sting much more than they initially had at the point of impact, as did Houllier's transfer dealings of the summer of 2002, particularly the passing on permanently signing Anelka and the added release of Litmanen while the cohort of new arrivals failed to impress.

A case of what gloriously was, in terms of 2000/01, offset by the agony of an unrequited tilt at even bigger prizes in the three seasons to follow, Houllier had taken Liverpool to the very doors of potential Premier League and Champions League glories only to misplace the keys to open them up once we'd arrived.

In the final reckoning, going into the winter of 2002/03, Houllier's moment to produce such successes had unwittingly gone and all that was left until his May

2004 departure was a thankless task to chase Liverpool's no longer wagging tail. The club was in need of fresh impetus and a new direction in which to travel.