

LIVERPOOL

PREMIER LEAGUE

CHAMPIONS



SEASON



2019-20



THREE

MOST MEMORABLE MATCHES

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MY THREE MOST MEMORABLE MATCHES

Mike Hopper

No 'Book of the Season' from yours truly this year. A serious health issue made writing one virtually impossible.

Besides, the competition from well-known names and websites was pretty much overwhelming – I've just read the Andy Robertson version and that offered a novel slant which alone, would have been hard to follow.

Anyway, as a fall-back, I thought I'd offer readers a free piece for good measure.

The season was a weird one with the latter stages played behind closed doors. I, for one, felt pretty well cheated at not being able to be present at Anfield for the presentation, but worse still being robbed of a parade which could likely have even dwarfed the previous year's incredible experience after the European Cup victory.

Still, belatedly I decided to offer a personal observation of last season's wonderful heroics – the Premiership title after 30 long years.

From that season, I asked myself which three games stood out as the most outstanding and enjoyable. And intriguingly, which did I ultimately rate as Number One?

#

3rd Place: Liverpool v. Everton 5-2

How many times have we ever been able to put five past the despised enemy from down the road? I remember beating them 4-0 under Brendan Rodgers and feeling positively angry that we'd not scored a fifth when Sturridge put a penalty into the Kop.

In recent years I've come to always feel confident about beating the blue noses, most especially at Anfield. It's been wonderful to see the downbeat expressions on the faces of the Everton fans as they arrive brash and unforgiving only to leave with the tail between their legs.

Before this particular fixture, our Manager had clearly done his homework. The previous weekend, Everton, then under Marco Silva, had done a defensive job on high-flying Leicester playing three at the back. Silva clearly had it in mind to do the same on this night in the derby.

The problem is that to be successful doing that, the need is to play a high line as well as have a degree of pace at the back, which Everton did not have.

Klopp had shocked supporters by resting both Salah and Firmino in favour of Origi and Shaqiri with instructions to play the ball long and over the top.

Let's be honest, that decision caused consternation amongst the home fans, especially leaving out Mo. We needn't have worried.

For the first goal, Mane broke fast and found Origi with a slide-rule pass which brilliantly dissected two defenders; the second was an equally clinical pass as Sadio picked out Shaqiri's diagonal run; the third was a lofted ball forward by Lovren which Origi took ever so skilfully on his toe from over his shoulder before making a fool of the England goalkeeper Pickford by lobbing him all in a single movement; the fourth - my favourite - started deep in the Reds'

penalty area. Suddenly Trent was breaking at speed down the left wing of all places and then slipping the ball sideways to Mane, who took the ball in his stride before planting it first time wide of Pickford's right hand.



• *Origi lobs Liverpool's third goal.*

At that moment, the keeper's arms seemed decidedly short and when he arrived at the Kop end, the fans had their own special song which alluded to the fact he couldn't reach the crossbar! (Reference to last season in injury time, when he allowed a miscue from Virgil to drop onto the crossbar for Divock to head in.)

Gini finally finished expertly to give the scoreline a more reflective appearance, but when was the last time any team could claim five goals which were all equally memorable? Not a single mediocre one amongst them. Wonderful stuff.

Who'd be a Bluenose at Anfield?

#

2nd Place Aston Villa v. Liverpool 1-2

For my runner-up selection I'm ready to reflect on a somehow bizarre experience regarding the away fixture at Villa Park. I wasn't in attendance, but that simply could not take anything away from the most incredible final few minutes.

This particular Saturday afternoon fixture, a rarity of a 3pm kick-off for Liverpool these days, meant there were no live pictures.

Villa had scored in the first half and fought a tense and tough rearguard action after that as Liverpool piled on the pressure.

These days there is a plethora of outlets to obtain scores and commentaries, some better than others. The BBC's printed stream is good, albeit slow and belated, but the sudden appearance of the shaded blue rectangle on the text offers a degree of tension.

We'd reached 88 minutes, still losing by that single goal, and this supporter had all but given up when the blue rectangle suddenly appeared with Andy Robertson's name printed therein.

Liverpool had saved the day with yet another last-gasp goal.

Relief was the overwhelming emotion. The notion that the game was not over hardly registered. For some reason the match was running later than the other Premiership fixtures and I simply sat anticipating the 'full time' caption.

But instead another blue rectangle appeared; another blue box. Sadio Mane had grabbed a winner and now utter astonishment took a hold of me.

Two goals inside five minutes right at the death left the most remarkable and memorable imprint on my brain.

*A bad defeat had suddenly been transformed into a decent point.
But we didn't see it that way. We wanted more.*

'In that long spell we were behind, we stuck to our principles...

'...Trent's cross was perfect. Sadio attacked the ball, getting across the man and meeting it with a perfect header...

'...when the ball hit the net, I'd have given anything to have been in the away end...I saw videos of the celebrations afterwards and it looked unbelievable in there...

'...people said to me that it felt like a title-winning moment, even though it was only early November!'



• *Andy Robertson peels away after heading the Reds' equaliser.*

The more I look back on that Saturday afternoon, the more I observe a pocket of time which was totally surreal. Indeed, it seemed like a watershed in the course of the season.

For Liverpool to change the face of a game in the way they did and with it, possibly the whole course of the season, was nothing short of mind-boggling!

As it was, Match of the Day would be an absolute must come 10.30 that evening!

1st Place; Liverpool v. Shrewsbury 1-0

When Klopp had insisted on resting all of his senior squad and playing, to all intents and purposes, his under-23 side for this FA Cup replay against Div.1 Shrewsbury, the media were delighted to launch one blistering attack after another regarding his decision.

The FA had initiated a winter break amidst great fanfare and the manager was insisting on his 1st team squad being able to take advantage of the rest. They were due to play in the Club World Cup the following week in far-off Qatar.

It was just the opportunity the critics needed to write stories such as him discrediting the name and traditions of the FA Cup.

The Manager was adamant however, that his boys, led by Neil Critchley, would do the club full justice.

By the day of the match, an evening kick-off, it was common knowledge that Liverpool were fielding an under-23 side – not a semblance of a first teamer amongst them.

Shrewsbury supporters smelt a killing; 8,000 of them filled the Anfield Road end – twice the number and more of their average home attendances. They were understandably making loads of din and what us Anfield regulars would have done to wipe the smile off their smug faces. Except, reality being what it was, there was no chance of that happening, was there?

Shrewsbury were fielding their full strength team of grown men; strong physical and beefy males who would surely brush aside the frail teenagers in red!

Grown men against kids would hardly be a contest. The visitors would brush aside the youngsters. People like me were out in force out of loyalty, showing our support and making the youngsters feel appreciated.

It didn't work out that way, however. From the very start the inexperienced young Reds stroked the ball about like seasoned professionals as if they were involved in an enlarged Rondo on the training pitch at the Kirkby Academy.

The crowd couldn't stop applauding the sheer belief within these boys; their self-confidence and swagger. Chances were created, but unfortunately an instinctive goal-scorer was the one missing ingredient; there was nobody to attack the space in front of goal.

That said, Shrewsbury offered little; for the most part, they were unable to get enough possession of the ball and could hardly get near Kelleher in the Liverpool goal.

The second half saw much of the same until, against all the pattern of play, the visitors struck and the 8,000 supporters in blue went wild. Except they'd reckoned without the dreaded VAR, which wasn't applied in Div. One.

In the build-up an ankle had gone a stride offside. No goal.

Oh my, how the Kop enjoyed that! Back to square one.

Then, from nowhere, a long ball, but nevertheless a telling one, was intercepted by the visitors centre half, Shaun Williams, who somehow contrived to divert the ball past his own keeper.

Pandemonium.

Now, surely, Shrewsbury would give it everything if only to maintain their pride. Instead however, they still couldn't get hold of the ball as the Reds continued to pass it around with arrogance.

It was an incredible performance by Neil Critchley's boys and when the final whistle sounded, a capacity crowd was euphoric – or at least, that is the home supporters.

Now, the erstwhile cocky visiting hordes were unable to believe their eyes, while for all of us, it was the most heart-warming occasion. All of us present to witness the event felt so proud at what this group of teenyboppers had succeeded in doing.



- *Shrewsbury centre-back Williams heads into his own net.*

How pleased I was to have been there. Now, all we wanted was for the first team to make it worthwhile by returning home from Qatar as Club World Champions.

As for the over-critical media, they could stew in their own bigoted negative rhetoric!

###

Readers don't have to agree with my choices, but it would be nice to get a response. An essay is not required, but three selections would be most interesting.

Do e-mail me on [*m.hopper@talktalk.net*](mailto:m.hopper@talktalk.net) if you have a minute. I'd love to hear from you.

Mike.