

Klopp must fix aimless crosses and brittle belief

With Liverpool winless in five league games, **Paul Joyce** assesses how the champions can get back on track

Transfer stalemate

Jürgen Klopp has said that ideally reinforcements in defence would have arrived this month to offset the problems created by the injuries to Virgil van Dijk and Joe Gomez. Liverpool have not simply missed two first-choice centre backs, but redeploying Fabinho from midfield to defence, and at times Jordan Henderson, has also had a negative effect on the team.

The financial impact of the coronavirus pandemic is one of the reasons why a signing is unlikely, with player availability another factor. The transfer strategy under Liverpool's owner, Fenway Sports Group, is not to pursue quick fixes. Diogo Jota, Thiago Alcântara and Kostas Tsimikas were prioritised ahead of a centre back last summer despite the sale of Dejan Lovren and Joel Matip's injury issues. But Fenway will know the potential repercussions of not buying with a place in the top four far from guaranteed.

"I'm not a five-year-old kid any more and if I don't get what I want then I start crying," Klopp said. "I'm responsible for a big part of this football club but there are people who are responsible for the whole thing. I cannot make their decision. I know they want to support us and they do."

"Now we talk about a centre half. Yes, it would help 100 per cent. Would we score more goals with a centre half? I'm not sure. Would it give us a little bit more stability in specific moments? Probably yes."

"What we have to do is improve the football in a decisive area with this squad. That's my job, not sitting here being disappointed or frustrated with some decisions. I'm not, I'm not."

Searching for a formula

The disruption caused by injuries has



Klopp has not only had to deal with injuries to big names but has also seen key players such as Alexander-Arnold, right, suffer a dip in form at the same time

How Liverpool's form has slipped this season

	First five games	Past five games
Total shots	97	89
Shots on target	36	16
Goals	13	1
Crosses from open play	69	132
Passes in final third	982	1,183
Touches in opp box	207	220

prevented the selection of a settled team and Henderson was sorely missed against the 1-0 home defeat by Burnley on Thursday. Yet the search for a convincing formula has become scattergun. Takumi Minamino opened the scoring in the 7-0 win over Crystal Palace, Liverpool's most recent league success back on December 19, but has played only six minutes since. Divock Origi was drafted into the team against Burnley

Solskjaer: My forwards aren't used to each other

Paul Hirst

Manchester United's chances of inflicting more pain on Liverpool tomorrow will depend on their composure in the final third, according to Ole Gunnar Solskjaer.

Liverpool, who have not won in their past five league games, meet United in the FA Cup seven days after the two teams played out a goalless draw at Anfield.

Last weekend, Solskjaer's team were caught offside eight times. In five of those instances, it was Marcus Rashford who had strayed beyond the defensive line, which is the most of any player in a single match in the league this season.

Solskjaer's team are renowned for their flair going forward, but the United manager believes that they will plunder

more goals if they occasionally slow their attacks down so they can pick the right pass.

"We attacked every time we got the ball, maybe too much," Solskjaer said, reflecting on the goalless stalemate.

"We went forward too quickly. We kept giving it away and we need to do better. Some of the runs were maybe too eager, especially at Anfield. I felt one or two times there we could've been one on one with the 'keeper'."

The goals of Rashford and Bruno Fernandes have fired United to the top of the Premier League, but Solskjaer still believes that his front line is a work in progress.

The deluge of matches means that he has had little time in between games to work on shape with his players and Edinson Cavani has only recently started hitting peak fitness after his arrival in October. "For us, it's getting used to

each other. Edinson is new. Bruno's not been here a year yet," Solskjaer said.

"When you get up the pitch, the decision might be to slow it down and play in their half, not just going for the killer pass. They're the little things we're trying to fine-tune, of course."

United are favourites to win the fourth-round tie at Old Trafford because of Liverpool's recent slump. United did spend much of the first half at Anfield last week camped in their own half, however, and Liverpool had 66 per cent of possession in total.

Solskjaer still rates Liverpool as one of the best counterpressing sides around. "We tried to press them high, but it's not easy," Solskjaer said. "They played well and they played their way out of our press."

"They had five midfielders out there to play out plus a 'keeper who is very capable."

said. "They were trying things to make it impossible for us to score goals and that makes it even harder for us. With technology you can know how teams play and everything."

The challenge for Liverpool was always to evolve. What has been clear in recent games is an overreliance upon crosses from open play. There have been 132 in the past five matches compared with 69 in the opening five games of the campaign, which serves to highlight one area of poor decision-making.

Brittle belief

Klopp has been unfortunate that, on top of high-profile absentees, he has also seen key players such as Trent Alexander-Arnold, Salah and Sadio Mané suffer a dip at the same time. That has resulted in others who were performing well being dragged down by the overall malaise.

"Some things have to work out so you can build confidence," Klopp said, "and that didn't work out in the final third in the last few games. Parts of the game were good enough and parts were not."

The good parts are clear. Comparing the past five games with the first five this season, a period in which they beat Leeds United, Chelsea and Arsenal, but lost against Aston Villa and drew with Everton, Liverpool have had more touches in the opposition penalty area [220 v 207] and played more passes in the final third [1,183 v 982]. A return of one goal compared with 13 is the overriding issue and until that changes it will remain a struggle.

Catching a break

The FA Cup fourth-round tie with Manchester United tomorrow offers an immediate chance to boost belief with a victory over a heavyweight rival. Klopp is set to field a strong line-up and retains faith that he has the players to orchestrate a revival in fortune. "We believe 100 per cent we can change that with this squad," he said. "We don't go and say, 'If we don't get this or that, then we cannot perform' or whatever."

"If we can change it immediately on Sunday, I don't know. But we will not stop trying. I promise."

All-rounder Pogba swaps creativity for more steel

Martin Hardy

Tactics board

There was the first touch to kill a looping clearance, then there was a movement inside, and when Fulham's defence failed to press, Paul Pogba let fly with a curling left-footed finish from about 25 yards for Manchester United's winner in their 2-1 victory at Craven Cottage on Wednesday. It was a stunning strike. Against Burnley the previous week, he struck a volley to secure a 1-0 win with less than 20 minutes to be played.

Yet it is more than the headline-grabbing goals that highlight Pogba's new-found importance to the side. He has forced Ole Gunnar Solskjaer to change his thinking by adding a more defensive side to his game.

The United manager has said that Pogba has returned to the team as a more rounded player. Crucially the Frenchman has been able to break the axis of Fred and Scott McTominay in holding midfield that has generally been Solskjaer's preferred choice in big games.

In the past three matches that have propelled United to the forefront of everyone's thoughts as potential title-winners, Pogba has

Man United v Liverpool

FA Cup fourth round, tomorrow, 5pm TV and radio: BBC One, talkSPORT

twice been used as a holding midfielder. His job has been to protect the once-vulnerable heart of United's central defence. Against Fulham he was paired with Fred and against Burnley he was alongside Nemanja Matic.

Only in the 0-0 draw with Liverpool last Sunday, in that run of three matches, was he deployed as one of the three attacking midfielders. But in a game where he was up against Andrew Robertson, the marauding Liverpool left back, the defensive side of that position cannot be understated.

Apart from his goals this season — three in the Premier League — Pogba's other offensive statistics have declined. He does not have an assist in his name in a campaign in which United are top of the table. In terms of expected assists — a measure of the quality of chances Pogba creates — there has been a major fall. In the 2018-19 season Pogba's expected-assists figure was 5.02. Last season it dropped to 2.65 and for this campaign, with his role being more defensive, it is 1.03.

It seems highly unlikely that the 27-year-old will match the 13 goals he scored in 2018-19, and perhaps last season, when he scored only once, provided more of an indication of his changing role.

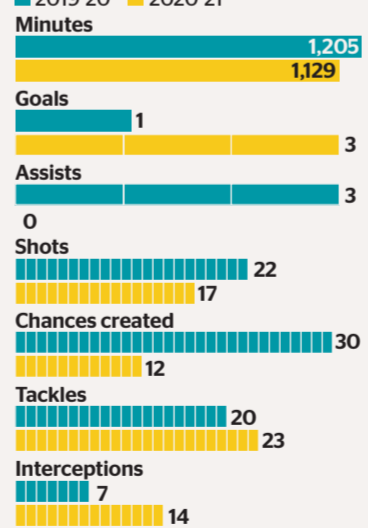
In 2018-19, Pogba had 105 shots. The seasons before he had 76 and 92. Again the drop this time is dramatic, those three goals coming



MICHAEL REGAN/GETTY IMAGES

How Pogba has improved his defensive qualities

Paul Pogba has played 16 times in the Premier League for Manchester United this season, exactly the same number as in the whole of last season. His stats show that while his creative output has dropped, he is fulfilling a more important defensive role



from only 17 attempts on goal. In the 2016-17 season he created 57 chances. In 2018-19 it was 55. We are at the halfway point of this season and Pogba has created only 12 chances for his team-mates.

Perhaps as significant as anything else is the amount of times that Pogba has touched the ball in the opposition's penalty area, dropping

from the height of 114 times from 35 games in 2018-19 (3.26 per match) to 29 in 16 games this season (1.81). The number was 28 in 16 games last season.

It can certainly be said that there has been more discipline to Pogba's game under Solskjaer and the doubling of his interceptions, from seven last season to 14 this, is further

proof of the way his game is more destructive now.

Solskjaer still relies on Fred and McTominay as holding midfielders in big games in the Premier League (versus Manchester City, Leeds United, Leicester City, Aston Villa and Liverpool) but Pogba's form and changing role are giving the United manager plenty of food for thought.

SPORT NOTEBOOK

Martyn Ziegler
Chief Sports Reporter



Blatter in no fit state to face questions about Fifa reign

The likelihood of Sepp Blatter having to face the music over the criminal and civil cases brought against him appears increasingly remote.

Blatter's poor health means that the former Fifa president will be in no fit state to answer questions raised by his successors at football's world governing body.

The 84-year-old, right, has been in hospital since before Christmas and was due to have a meeting next week to answer questions from investigators over some of the allegations.

Blatter, who has been under criminal investigation by Swiss prosecutors since 2015, came out of intensive care this week after being placed in an induced coma following heart surgery.

He has not even been told about Fifa's latest criminal complaint against him, which centres on the financing of the World Football Museum in Zurich.

His daughter, Corinne Blatter Andenmatten, has criticised, Fifa saying

that he should be able to live the rest of his life without being

"constantly torpedoed" by the organisation, and there is clearly no love lost between

her and Blatter's successor as Fifa president, Gianni Infantino.

She claimed Infantino "wants to destroy everything that my father built", adding: "This is a clear sign of insecurity and Infantino will always be in my father's shadow."

Blatter has always denied all the allegations.



Botham takes a pork pie pasting

Advertising watchdogs have contacted Ian Botham after the former England cricketer plugged a brand of pork pies that had been sent to him as a gift.

"Influencers" on social media are supposed to include the hashtag #ad to make clear that they are promoting a product, even if it is a gift, and a gushing tweet on Christmas Eve by Lord Botham, or Baron Botham of Ravensworth to give him his full title after his elevation to the House of Lords, led to a complaint from the charities researcher, Dr Alex May.

The Advertising Standards Authority said it had been in touch with Botham to provide "guidance on what we expect of brands and influencers on social media". A representative for Botham said that the sporting great had merely been thanking the manufacturer and there was "no question of Botham having received any remuneration or any form of reward".

Hiring culture

There is a well-trodden path from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to the Premier League, as highlighted again by the top civil servant Helen McNamara's appointment as the league's new executive director.

McNamara, the deputy cabinet secretary, worked at the DCMS on London's Olympic preparations. She succeeds Bill Bush, who also worked in the department, as did Tim Vine, the Premier League's director of UK and international public affairs.

Tokyo tweaks suit Team GB

Despite the uncertainty over the Tokyo Olympics, the organisers are insistent that the Games can go ahead with some significant changes, including having fewer athletes at the opening ceremony.

That would hardly be a problem for the British Olympic team — only 55 of 366 Team GB members took part in the Rio 2016 opening ceremony amid fears that attending the lengthy event could affect their performances. The International Olympic Committee is desperate for the Games to go ahead, even behind closed doors, but that would mean no ticket income for the organisers, who are facing huge public opposition.

Brighton job boost

More than 200 people were trained by St John Ambulance in how to deliver the Covid-19 job at Brighton & Hove Albion's Amex Stadium last weekend. "As we start to see the light at the end of the tunnel, we will do everything we can to support the national effort," Paul Barber, the club's chief executive, said.

Agency's big guns

Three former commercial officers with Arsenal have joined the agency Roc Nation, which was founded by the rapper Jay-Z and represents the footballer Marcus Rashford and the rugby star Maro Itoje. Michael Higham, who joins the firm's commercial team from Seville, worked for Arsenal, as did the other new executives, Tomek Kowal and Luke Donaldson.