

Klopp

My Liverpool Romance

Anthony Quinn

faber

In memory of Peter Quinn (1930–2019),
my dad, who first took me to Anfield

I'm not that interested in sport, but I'm so glad Jürgen Klopp is in the world and not only because my husband is a Liverpool fan. In the age of Trump and Johnson he delights me as an example of what male leadership can look like: passionate, humorous, generous, kind, driven by humility and integrity and, above all, decency. My husband loads up clips from post-match interviews and match highlights for me to watch and without fail Klopp makes me laugh or my heart swell.

Lucy Kirkwood, playwright,
quoted in the *Observer*

Prologue

On Wednesday 11 December, the eve of the 2019 general election, the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra performed Handel's *Messiah* at the Barbican Concert Hall in London. It was a joy – and a relief – to be in a place where the dismal sound and fury of Brexit couldn't penetrate, if only for a couple of hours. When the soprano opened Part III with the air 'I Know That My Redeemer Liveth' I found myself transported in a daydream of reverential delight. I imagine others around me experienced something similar. What a lovely phrase it is – *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth* . . . But on this occasion it wasn't the Divine I was pondering. My thoughts were more earthbound, temporal, absorbed in the wonders being wrought by a certain German maestro. And I don't mean Handel.

I was still thinking of the previous night when Liverpool FC had beaten Red Bull Salzburg 2–0 and thus qualified for the knockout stages of the 2019–20 Champions League. A victory masterminded by their inimitable manager Jürgen Klopp. Is he My Redeemer? No. Is he the Messiah? He's not even a very naughty boy. Is he the remarkable life-force driving a football club whose glory days looked to be a thing of the past? Most definitely. And the gratifying aspect of this union between club and manager is that it felt destined. A match that was meant to be. There is

literally no one else you can imagine doing the job that Jürgen Klopp has done at Liverpool.

And yet ten years ago I had never heard of him. Not many had. Now, in 2020, he is probably the most famous and admired football manager in the world. How did this happen? Not being a passionate devotee of the German Bundesliga I was slow to catch on to the rise of a young coach who had made a name for himself at Mainz 05 and was resuscitating the fortunes of sleeping giant Borussia Dortmund. I think it was in 2011 when I heard his name for the first time. Liverpool were enduring an unhappy period in the doldrums, traduced by the financial mismanagement of Hicks–Gillett and, on the pitch, stuck in reverse under Roy Hodgson, a good manager in the wrong job. Names of his potential successors were being bandied around, as names will be, including that of Kenny Dalglish. But an LFC friend, one of a handful among our Friday five-a-side game in Clerkenwell, told me ‘they ought to look at Jürgen Klopp’. Who? He gave me a thumbnail sketch, which I promptly forgot, diverted by the false dawn of Dalglish’s second term and then the brittle magnificence of Brendan Rodgers’s tilt at the Premier League title in 2013–14.

Ah, that was the season that was. Liverpool playing football at 150mph, spearheaded by an attacking trident that tore apart opponents at will, top at Christmas, five points ahead in March, surfing on a wild surmise that *we’re gonna win the league*. However many the

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opposition scored we would contrive to score one more. Until we couldn't. On 27 April 2014, following Chelsea's 2-0 win at Anfield, aka The Day They Parked the Bus, I noted mournfully in my diary:

. . . Glad it was Gerrard's mistake – he's the easiest of all to forgive. If Kolo Touré had done it, for instance, I'd have cursed Rodgers ever after for selecting him.

Meanwhile, over in Germany, Dortmund were beginning to make a noise with back-to-back Bundesliga titles, the Double in 2012, a Champions League final in 2013. Klopp was now on the radar. Following Liverpool's sob-story implosion under Rodgers and the disastrous endgame of his final months in 2015 (Stoke beating us 6-1 in May was the low point)* rumours of a replacement were twanging on the grapevine. Carlo Ancelotti was mooted. But the name that kept echoing back was Klopp. He had already decided to quit Dortmund and take a year off. Klopp: it had a ring to it, like a famous stand. Klopp: would the prospect of Anfield lure him out of his sabbatical? Klopp! Klopp! Klopp! The hoof-beats of destiny were picking up speed, coming closer. Some fans were now so enamoured of the possibility that they petitioned Klopp's wife on Twitter.

* To make matters worse it was also Steven Gerrard's final game for LFC.

Rodgers, having overseen a 1–1 draw in the Merseyside derby on 4 October, was sacked the same day. By the end of that week Klopp had signed a three-year contract at Anfield and was doing a walkabout on the pitch. Let it be noted that he looked great – imposingly tall, relaxed, dressed in jeans, black shirt, black blazer, his hair neatly trimmed. The famous smile was shyly in evidence. Then he did his first press conference.

After the mutual adoration and moist-eyed emoting that characterised his relationship with the Dortmund fans, Klopp dialled it down for his Anfield inauguration. He presented himself at the microphone in a thoughtful, quietly spoken manner. He was fully aware of the significance of his appointment ('It's the biggest honour I can imagine to be here') yet he didn't want to bang the war drum too early. The power chords of 'Heavy Metal Football' were kept in check. He was there to 'try to help' a club that, while underperforming, could hardly be considered in trouble. He couched his programme for renewal as a double appeal to the players and to the fans. If someone wanted to help the club they had to change 'from doubter to believer'. That was his second great soundbite. His first seemed to come by accident, though knowing his love of preparation he may just have made it look that way. 'Does anyone in this room think that I can do wonders?' he asked, immediately insisting that he was just a guy from the Black Forest whose mother was proud and probably watching him now on TV. 'So I am

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a totally normal guy . . . I'm the normal one.' Bullseye. His self-deprecation not only got a laugh, it placed him in pertinent contrast to the kind of football manager who might proclaim himself, say, 'The Special One'. Arrogance would not be the Klopp way. The only 'special' thing in his eyes was the club he hoped to serve. He understood Liverpool. He understood us.

He then pulled another masterstroke. 'I hope to enjoy my work,' he said, earnestly, looking directly at his inquisitors. 'All the people told me so much about the British press. So it's up to you – to show me they are all liars.' Another big laugh. He had disarmed the press by teasing them, and they loved it. What wonderful nerve to include *them* in his project: I propose to you football that everyone can enjoy, players, fans, managers, and yes, even you, the nasty, snarky hounds of the back pages. When someone asked him about the Anfield pantheon – i.e. the weight of history – he deflected the question by observing that no Liverpool manager had ever taken up the post already believing himself to be a legend. That sort of esteem had to be earned. He repeated something he had once said at Dortmund: 'It's not so important what people think of you when you come in. It's much more important what people think when you leave.' Again the humility, the sense of perspective, resonates. The person blessed with true confidence has no need to swagger or to showboat; and his self-awareness allows him to understand others. You could build a career on it.

A wise man once said, ‘People don’t believe in ideas: they believe in people who believe in ideas.’ This is what Klopp got so right in his introduction that day. Conducting himself in a humble, humorous way, he set out key ideas – turning doubters to believers, the necessity of keeping your feet on the ground (‘normal one’), the honour of serving a storied institution – which with patience and togetherness he believed had a good chance of being fulfilled. What’s more, in pursuing these goals (and here is a crucial Klopp component) they would have *fun*. In the clenched, high-stakes business of the Premier League fun is the element that often gets lost. Managers take on a haunted look pretty quickly nowadays. Who can stand that much scrutiny? Or that much abuse? Ole Gunnar Solskjær went from bright-eyed charmer to wizened touchline Gollum in a matter of months. It’s understandable to a degree: their jobs are permanently on the line. But even the grim-faced pundits on TV – Keane, Souness, Mourinho – look like they’re auditioning for the remake of *Judgment at Nuremberg*. Klopp knows you must take your work seriously but not yourself, and that is the surest way to have fun.

Five years on from his arrival you would have to say his reputation has never been higher. There have been setbacks along the way – three lost cup finals – but they shrank to a footnote in May 2019 when Liverpool lifted their sixth European Cup in Madrid. Two other trophies, the UEFA Super Cup and the FIFA Club World Cup, followed in the autumn. Halfway through the 2019–20

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season Liverpool were a runaway train, unbeaten for a year in the Premier League and heading towards their first title in 30 years. They had achieved this with football of such fluency, invention and ruthlessness that even rivals doffed their caps to them. The only thing that could stop us now was a global catastrophe.

This book is not a biography of Jürgen Klopp. If you want a factual record of his life and career there are such books available. I don't intend to write a conventional account of him, because he is not a conventional football manager. I'm pretty sure he is not a conventional human being. Writing about someone you admire can be a way of trying to understand that person. I want to examine the things that set him apart from other football managers. His sense of humour. His boundless geniality. His off-the-cuff smartness. His ability to inspire and command. His obsessive tactical nous. His amazing set of teeth. We have come to realise what a lucky time it is to be a Liverpool fan. I imagine there was a similar feeling when Shankly began exerting his authority at Anfield in the early 1960s.

For years it was the impossible dream. I wondered if I would ever see another Liverpool title victory in my lifetime. I was a doubter, now I'm a believer. Klopp has made Monkees of us all.

1. Don't Mention the War

Marooned on the straggling outskirts of Liverpool, Huyton was once a pretty backwater of parks and greens and churches. Its parish roots can be traced to Anglo-Saxon times. In the middle part of the 19th century merchants and shipping magnates retreating from the city began to build large houses and estates there. Its prosperity was sudden, and short-lived. Like many such places its green fields and meadows were swallowed up by the black jaws of industry. Quarrying and coalmining became pivotal to the local economy, and once the railway arrived the population multiplied. By the 1930s its village character was all but forgotten. During the war two internment camps were established there, one for 'enemy aliens', that is, Germans, Italians and Austrians already resident in Britain, and one for POWs.

After the war the reputation of Huyton began a long and agonised decline, though it also figured in the news as the parliamentary constituency of Harold Wilson during his two terms as prime minister (1964-70 and 1974-76). Other names brought it brief renown. The painter Christopher Wood (1901-30) was a native, hated the place and got out as quickly as he could. The actor Rex Harrison (1908-90) lived on Tarbock Road before he became a star of the English stage and screen. Hard to

credit that the man who played the debonair Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* and gave Audrey Hepburn's Eliza Doolittle elocution lessons might once have spoken with a Liverpool accent. If he ever did he soon dispensed with it. I wonder if in their heyday he chanced to overhear his fellow Scouser and namesake George Harrison, whose Wavertree vowels were the flattest of all The Beatles: 'Clurr with the furr hurr.' 'No, George,' Rex would reply in his crisp Higgins manner. 'Let's try that again: "*Clare with the fair hair.*"'

A Huytonian of more recent vintage is the elusive and enigmatic Lee Mavericks, frontman of the great lost band The La's. Their mega-hit 'There She Goes' still gets regular air-play, its jangling chords and harmonies instantly redolent of the floppy-haired 1990s. It's not my favourite of their songs. That would be 'Son of a Gun', which opened their first and only studio album, *The La's*, a record Mavericks subsequently disowned. The song distils in a haunting and beautiful way what I've always imagined to be the character of outcast Liverpool:

*If you want I'll sell you a life story
'Bout a man who's at loggerheads with his past all
the time
He's alive and living in purgatory
All he's doing is rooming in hotels
And scooping up lots of wine*

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Come back, Lee Mavericks, wherever you are. What the town is most famous for producing is footballers. Peter Reid, of Everton and England, was a Huyton lad. So too Joey Barton and Leon Osman. Its most revered son, as far as LFC fans are concerned, is Steven Gerrard, for years the club's Most Valuable Player, captain, lodestar, and perhaps, in years to come, manager. You can Google a photograph of Ironside Road, the cul-de-sac where he grew up. I also checked it on a map. It's a ten-minute walk from Hurst Park Drive, on the other side of Huyton Lane.

Which is where I grew up, in the late 1960s. By then the suburban sprawl that took hold between the wars was going modernist, post-industrial, high-rise. The town planners – those bogeymen of the 1960s and '70s – had torn down its gracious Victorian housing (and anything else of beauty or value) to throw up big estates. A brave new world, or so they thought. Ours was a semi in the middle of the Drive, an unexceptional house in an unexceptional road, though possibly a bit more comfortable than the tower blocks into which people were fast being decanted. I remember my terror of the kids who lived in Hurst Park Close – 'The Closies' – not least because some of them rode around on dogs. When I mention this to friends nowadays they guffaw – *You're making it up!* Only I'm not. I saw kids mounted on large dogs, bareback. I don't recall thinking that my surroundings were bleak or ugly, because they were all I knew. We were close to greenery with the King George V Memorial Playing

Fields – ‘Georgy Fields’, as it was inevitably known – and there was a back garden where we played footie.

I think I was possibly an eccentric kid, though close up all kids seem pretty eccentric to me. Childhood for most is a weird and fearful state: I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone. I certainly must have *looked* eccentric, spindle-legged, bespectacled, with one lens patched up after an operation to correct a squint. ‘Gozzy’, as the condition was known. As a five-year-old I also insisted on wearing – riddle me this – a kilt, bedecked with a mini-sporran. I have no idea why. I had no Scots ancestry, so far as I knew, and I had no other designs on skirts. Maybe I just liked the look. This was the same impulse that determined my earliest allegiance to a football club. Which wasn’t Liverpool, by the way. The first team I ever loved was Celtic, and not because of Kenny Dalglish or Jimmy Johnstone or Bobby Lennox or the ‘Lisbon Lions’ of 1967. All that came later. What I instantly loved and coveted was their green-and-white hooped top, which I first saw on David Perez, a good-looking footballer in my older brother’s year at our new primary school. Those green hoops were like the rich electric green of a snooker baize, or the velvety green of our first Subbuteo pitch. The red and black Umbro logo winked like a ruby on the white shorts. All I lacked was the olive-skinned sexiness of David Perez. And the footballing skills.

I guess I first wore that Celtic top in April 1971, a gift on my seventh birthday, by which point football more

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or less ruled my life. In May, I made my First Holy Communion on the Saturday Arsenal beat Liverpool 2–1 in the FA Cup final, which was also the first time I'd ever seen a live match in colour – our aunties in Old Swan had a colour telly years before we did. Charlie George lying star-fished on the Wembley pitch after scoring the extra-time winner. I recall a general despond in the room at the time – my family were all LFC fans – but I didn't feel it. I was a Celtic fan, see, and in any case my interest in football was too indiscriminate, too all-consuming, to let a single result get me down. I lived football, in a variety of forms. If I wasn't kicking a ball at Calderstones Park (we'd moved by then) I was drawing pictures of football matches in a scarlet spiral-bound notebook, or poring over *Shoot!* magazine and memorising football scores from all four divisions. Why? Because I was a boy, and that's the sort of uselessly pedantic thing boys do. This was a time when I honestly believed that a professional football team lived on a terrace next door to one other, each billeted in a house the same number as their shirt – so on LFC Street Chris Lawler would live at no. 2, Emlyn Hughes at no. 6, Steve Heighway at no. 9, and so on. It came as a shock to learn that most of them lived in Tudorbethan mansions dotted around Formby.

Back then I assumed that every other city was like Liverpool, where football and music and religion were just the elements you breathed. Only later did I realise that Liverpool was not like every other city – was

not like *any* other city. Geographically out on a limb, on the edge of the North West, its back was turned to the rest of the country. That didn't matter when it was the booming port of high Victorian England, the second city of Empire through which most of the country's wealth filtered. Liverpool's ship was always coming in, until it wasn't. Containerisation did for the sea trade, the economic centre shifted from the north to the south, and the liners began sailing from Southampton. No city, with the possible exception of Jericho, had suffered such a dramatic collapse. Economically in tatters, it got a reputation as a 'difficult' inward-looking place. Crushed during the Thatcherite clampdown of the 1980s, it was further damaged by certain wildcat politicians and other wilful saboteurs. In a generation we had gone from Beatlemania to *Boys from the Blackstuff*.

Not all criticism of the place has been groundless. The keen sense of grievance can come over as whingeing – 'Self-Pity City', as one newspaper called it – though that might be a result of the catarrhal accent that makes every sentence sound like a complaint. Our assertion of Scouse pride can sound defensive and tiresome to outsiders. The warm-heartedness of the people might be more appreciated if they didn't keep on telling you how warm-hearted they are.

And yet Liverpool *did* suffer in ways that exceeded other parts of the country. During the Second World War its strategic importance in the Battle of the Atlantic was not

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lost on the Nazis. During the Blitz of May 1941 German planes dropped 870 tonnes of high explosives and 112,000 incendiaries on the city. Around 1,700 Liverpoolians died in the bombardment and 76,000 were made homeless. That was in a single week. From August 1940 to January 1942 raids killed around 4,000 people in Liverpool, Bootle and Wirral, injured 3,500 and destroyed 10,000 homes. Other cities took a grievous pounding, with catastrophic losses of life and livelihood, but in terms of the ratio of deaths to population only London was more heavily hit than Liverpool. I was born in 1964, nearly 20 years after the end of the war, but the scars of those bombings were an overwhelming presence. You saw wide forlorn spaces everywhere, prairies of rubble and cinder, derelict buildings with windows like sightless eyes. A lone pub or church surrounded by wasteland was a common sight. An absence that felt like a presence. Researching that time had such an effect on me that I wrote my first novel about it.

If you want further evidence take a look at *Morning in the Streets*, an extraordinary BBC television documentary of 1959 that examines a city pickled in a raw post-war gloom. The terraces and cobbled lanes bear a gaunt, stricken look, as if the raids had happened weeks rather than years ago. This being Liverpool you hear a spirit of defiance and stoical humour in the montage of voices, and there are recurrent images of children gaily at play on a street or schoolyard. But no one watching could fail to see that the life here was tough, and comfortless. The war is hardly mentioned –

it doesn't need to be, because what these people are living in is a bombsite necropolis.

And who was to blame? If you grew up in Britain during the 1960s and '70s you could not escape the fact that the Germans were the most hated people on the planet. If your local environs didn't remind you of their evil legacy then cinema and TV and comics ('For you, Tommy, the war is over') would set you straight. The first film I remember watching on the big screen was *Where Eagles Dare*. The first comedy I remember laughing at was *Dad's Army*, though its credit sequence featuring those swastika-tipped arrows snaking through France and taking aim from across the Channel always looked a bit sinister. *The World at War* and its plangent title theme invaded living rooms in 1973. Around the same time the BBC drama *Colditz* became another obsession, which led me in turn to read *They Have Their Exits*, memoir of Airey Neave, the first Briton to make a successful escape or 'home run' from the prison fortress.*

At school, among the books that got passed around a lot were Sven Hassel's pulp novels – among them *Wheels of Terror*, *Monte Cassino* and *Reign of Hell* – about a German tank battalion of criminals and misfits brutally fighting their way through Europe. According to his website the Hassel oeuvre has been translated into 25 languages and

* He later became an MP and chief confidant of Margaret Thatcher. He was the shadow home secretary when killed by an Irish Republican car bomb in 1979.

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sold over 53 million copies. I wonder if Jürgen Klopp (born 1967) was one of Hassel's schoolboy readers. He would have been the right age. Indeed I wonder what the young Jürgen felt about his homeland and its descent into the abyss. How did they teach Hitler and the Holocaust in German classrooms during the 1970s? His parents, Norbert and Elisabeth, would have been children during the war. What did they tell him about it? The knowledge of what their elders did (or failed to do) between 1933 and 1945 is quite a burden for the next generation to carry.

In the 1990s one of comedian Harry Enfield's less celebrated characters was a blond, bespectacled German student named – but of course! – Jürgen. At large in London he batters on to random strangers and engages them in stilted small talk until he admits, abashed, that he's German. In one sketch he's at a bus stop querying the late running of the service when he suddenly blurts out to the commuter next to him: 'I feel I must apologise for the conduct of my nation in the war.' The commuter, startled, replies, 'You weren't even born then.' But Jürgen will not be appeased: 'As a German I share in the guilt of my forefathers. The crimes committed during those dark years are a stain on my nation's history and [*rising to hysteria*] you must NEVER, EVER let me forget this.'

For some reason I can imagine the other Jürgen roaring with laughter at this. Perhaps he thinks, like the rest of us born at a safe distance from the war, *There but for the grace of Gott go I . . .* The accident of timing has spared us.

If Klopp had been born 50 years earlier in 1917 he would have been, as a 22-year-old, prime fodder for the German war machine, maybe flying one of the Heinkels or Junkers that bombed British cities; or, better suited to his tactical know-how, commanding a Panzer division in occupied Europe; or, if he'd been very unlucky, fighting to the last man on the Eastern Front. Stuttgart, Klopp's birthplace, endured its own rain of hell, raided repeatedly by British and American bombers. The worst of it came on 12 September 1944 when the RAF dropped 184,000 bombs, levelling the city centre and killing nearly a thousand people.

History, it's said, is the verdict of the lucky on the unlucky. What does Klopp feel – what does any modern German feel – when the latest WW2 blockbuster comes round? Fine when the Nazis get it in the neck. But Anglo-American cinema still loves to celebrate our vanquishing of the German rank-and-file, most of whom were conscripted in the first place. Even among more civilised voices one hears an old-fashioned relish for 'sticking it to the Krauts'. In his review of *Saving Private Ryan* the *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane wrote: 'Despite Spielberg's avowed intent to darken and coarsen the formulas of the war film, old moviegoing habits die hard: I was practically standing on my seat and yelling at Tom Hanks to kill more Germans, and then, when he had finished killing Germans, to kill more Germans.' It could make a people defensive, or paranoid, to realise how loathed they have been.

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When Klopp was born in June 1967, Bill Shankly was almost exactly halfway through his managerial career at LFC. I doubt if he, or anyone else connected to Anfield, ever envisaged the possibility that one day a German would be in charge of the club. Imagine the reaction to it on the Kop ('The Germans bombed our chippy, la!'). Shankly had played for Preston North End at Grimsby on 2 September 1939, the day before war was declared. It was also the day he turned 26, approaching the prime of his footballing life. Born in Glenbuck on the edge of the Ayrshire coalfield, he was a miner before he became a footballer. As he says in his autobiography (*Shankly*, 1976) he could have gone back to the pits or else stayed in his job as a riveter, making Hampden bombers. Instead he joined the RAF, where he also boxed and played football. His chapter on the war hardly mentions the enemy, aside from a close shave when his station at Manchester was bombed. He rose to the rank of acting corporal but had no urge to go higher: 'Even so, I was possibly a better example to the men than some of the sergeants were. I gave more advice than the sergeants did, and without the bull.' He disliked seeing any recruit being picked on for the sake of it. He once stepped in to prevent a fellow corporal victimising a boy because of his faith. 'I stopped that man from being stupid.' I bet he did. It's the act of a football manager in waiting. There are moments in *Shankly* when you are inescapably reminded of the manager who would come some years after him: the zeal, the vision, the wit, the

common sense, the passionate commitment to improving, inspiring, winning.

But that's ahead of us. Given the ready availability of foreign talent and the money sloshing around the English league it's surprising how slowly German players were recruited. Surprising, that is, unless you happen to believe there was a residual antipathy towards Germany dating back to the war: The Hunforgiven. As a kid the only Teutons I had any affection for were Paul Breitner ('Der Afro') – no footballer had ever looked cooler with his socks rolled to his ankles – and Günter Netzer, a killer-blond midfielder who I always thought of as the German Tony Currie.

In the Premier League era suspicion of the old enemy was slow to thaw. Jürgen Klinsmann, deplored for his diving during Italia '90, became a hugely popular presence at Spurs in the mid-1990s, but there wasn't a rush of his countrymen following him. Andy Möller helped to set back Anglo-German relations years with his celebration of the winning penalty in the Euro '96 semi against England – hands on hips, chest puffed out. The pose seemed to embody a cartoon of *Übermensch* arrogance. Or maybe we just hated his poodle-rock hair. Arsenal, a cosmopolitan club, signed their first German in 1997 (Alberto Mendez, of German-Spanish extraction). Robert Huth came to Chelsea in 2001. Man Utd, remarkably, didn't sign a single German until Bastian Schweinsteiger in 2015. Per capita the likes of France,

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Spain and Denmark have supplied far more players to British football than Germany.

The exception to this rule, of course, is the sainted Bert Trautmann, who between 1949 and 1964 made 545 appearances for Manchester City. Trautmann had fought on the Eastern Front, apparently with great distinction, before being captured at the end of the war and transferred to a POW camp in Lancashire. Offered the chance of repatriation in 1948 he chose to stay in England, working on a farm and playing in goal for the local team, St Helens Town. When news got out that City, a First Division club, had signed him it sparked protests, including a demonstration of 20,000 people outside Maine Road. How could a Nazi ex-paratrooper be allowed to besmirch our national game? Trautmann's personal decency, not to mention his ace goalkeeping, soon won the crowd round. He entered legend when he sustained a broken neck while helping his team to victory in the 1956 FA Cup final (3-1 against Birmingham City). He is surely the only footballer ever to break his neck in a match *and play on*. The break wasn't discovered until an X-ray examination three days later. Trautmann will also remain the only player ever to be awarded both an FA Cup winner's medal and an Iron Cross.

Liverpool weren't exactly in a hurry to sign their first German. Roy Evans got the ball rolling when he brought Karl-Heinz Riedle to Anfield in the summer of 1997. Riedle, part of the West German team that won the World Cup

in 1990, was a rangy striker who scored some good goals during his two years at LFC. But he was unfortunate in his timing, having arrived just as the teenage Michael Owen was breaking into the side. In the summer of 2000 Gérard Houllier signed two German internationals, both defenders, with mixed results. Christian Ziege lasted at Anfield for less than a year, his signing from Middlesbrough more newsworthy – LFC were fined £20,000 by the FA for making an illegal approach – than anything he did on the pitch. Markus Babbel proved to be a fine marauding right-back in the Liverpool tradition, and scored the opener in the 5–4 win over Alavés in the 2001 UEFA Cup final. He promised much, before his career was cruelly interrupted by the paralysing muscular condition Guillain-Barré syndrome.*

But there was a German from that time who won lasting respect at Anfield. Dietmar Hamann – Didi – was a holding midfielder signed from Newcastle in 1999, bean-pole-straight, mild-looking, enviably cool in possession. He often partnered Steven Gerrard, who later said that Hamann’s defensive work and tackling allowed him to play further upfield. His finest hour, as every Liverpool fan knows, came in a match he didn’t even start. At half-time in the 2005 Champions League final Liverpool were on the verge of complete humiliation, 3–0 down to a rampant AC Milan and seemingly out for the count. Rafa Benítez had taken an uncharacteristic gamble with

* Of which Mel Brooks once commented, ‘When they name a disease after two guys, it’s got to be terrible.’

his inclusion of Harry Kewell in the starting line-up. It didn't pay off, and after 23 minutes the sadly unreliable Kewell limped out of the action. Vladimír Šmicer, his replacement, was game enough but hardly the sort to orchestrate a Liverpool fightback. For the second half Benítez made a tactical switch by bringing on Hamann, whose unflappable presence disrupted Milan's rhythm and enabled Gerrard and Xabi Alonso to get forward. It led to the 'six minutes of madness' that turned the game around. (Šmicer, I never doubted you, honest.) The stereotype of Germanic efficiency and self-possession that had so often spread despond among British football fans was at last a weapon we had on our side: Hamman for All Seasons.

There followed another hiatus in which no German player came through the door at Anfield. Amid a flurry of desperate-looking buys in the last phase of Rodgers's tenure – let's hear the one-hand clap for Mario Balotelli (£16 million) – Emre Can arrived from Bayer Leverkusen for £9.75 million. Initially he was played in a three-man defence before Klopp moved him to a holding midfield role in which he often excelled and scored goals, including a spectacular overhead kick against Watford that was Premier League goal of the 2016–17 season. Contractual negotiations overshadowed his last season – he wanted a move, and eventually got one, to Juventus – though before he left he played his last game in a red shirt as a sub in the Champions League final of 2018.

That night in Kiev also marked the last competitive match our other German, Loris Karius, would play for LFC, and here we must pause to make an admission: Klopp doesn't always get it right. Liverpool had had a goalkeeping problem ever since Pepe Reina's departure in 2013. Simon Mignolet looked decent enough in the early days but was eventually exposed as a liability. You may recall a home game against Sunderland in February 2016 when, winning 2-0, fans staged a walk-out protest on 77 minutes against ticket prices. Unfortunately Mignolet also decided to take early leave – of his goalkeeping duties – and failed to keep out a curling free-kick from Adam Johnson (who ought to have been in prison at the time, but that's another story). Jermain Defoe equalised in the 89th minute. At the time it felt like another soft Liverpool capitulation; deep down we knew that a reliable goalie was a basic requirement of any club with title ambitions.

Karius looked a good prospect when LFC signed him in May 2016. He had already played for the Manchester City under-18 and under-21 teams and had just been voted the second-best keeper in the Bundesliga after Manuel Neuer. Klopp may also have had a soft spot, given the club they were signing him from was Mainz 05: the old school. By October Klopp had named him the team's number 1, at which point Karius revealed his propensity to drop clangers. His uncertain keeping was scrutinised in another collapse, against Bournemouth – 3-1 up with 14 minutes to go, 4-3 down at full-time – and Klopp twisted again

by replacing him with Mignolet. He continued to defend Karius after he was restored to the side, seeming to regard the errors he made as an aberration rather than an intrinsic flaw in his game. When the press pounced on his mistake in allowing Leroy Sané to score at the near post in a tense 4–3 victory over City at Anfield Klopp dismissed the criticism as ‘a hair in the soup’. Huh? We shook our heads and trusted him to know best. In retrospect Klopp’s loyalty was a rare blind spot in his managerial vision – he simply couldn’t see the accident waiting to happen.

When it did happen it was to be calamitous, a career-defining, cup-conceding nightmare from which there was no waking. We were just getting over the loss of Salah – courtesy of Ramos’s sneaky judo throw – when early in the second half Karius collected the ball and, without pausing to check, bowled it out. Benzema stuck out an opportunistic foot and deflected it agonisingly into the net. Has a sillier goal ever been scored in a Champions League game? The second howler you could almost see coming when Bale, having just scored a worldie, had a quick look up and from 35 yards out blasted a left-foot shot straight at Karius – who somehow managed to punch it behind him into the net. *Caramba!* I felt for him in that terrible moment of humiliation. I also wanted to throttle him. Klopp, loyal as ever, exonerated his distraught protégé by insisting that he was already suffering a concussion, having been elbowed by the demonic Ramos. This may have been true; doctors checking him later said so. But you felt a sneaking suspicion

that Karius – who I now thought of as preKarius – would have cost us whether he'd had a bang on his head or not. The mistakes were always in him.

When Bill Shankly took charge of the club in December 1959 Liverpool were still in the old Second Division. His first game as manager was against Cardiff, and we lost 4–0. 'After only one match I knew that the team as a whole was not good enough,' he wrote. 'We needed strengthening through the middle – a goalkeeper and a centre half and somebody up front to create goals and score them.' The three components, the spine, of any great team. After nearly three years at Anfield Klopp had everything but the right goalkeeper. It was as though he couldn't bear to see his young German fail. But by now the penny had dropped, someone had made a decision, and two months after Kiev LFC bought Alisson Becker from Roma for a reassuringly huge fee. We rejoiced – a top keeper at last! – and didn't mention the fact that the last time Alisson had played at Anfield we put five past him in the Champions League semi. His performances in the 2018–19 season were sensational: 21 clean sheets in the Premier League and many vital saves* earned him the Golden Glove award. Not to mention the profound gratitude of fans who could barely remember what a safe pair of hands looked like. In the Champions League final

* His injury-time save against Milik in the Champions League win over Napoli was magnificent, and season-defining. 'If I knew Alisson was this good I would have paid double,' said Klopp.

DON'T MENTION THE WAR

against Spurs in Madrid I thought Alisson was our man of the match.

I wonder if someone had to persuade Klopp that Karius was the team's Achilles heel. He often talks of the brilliant people behind the scenes advising him. Perhaps he knows that greatness involves humility, and that admitting your mistake isn't a sign of weakness but of good sense. The LFC transfer policy, so often wrong-headed in the last 30 years, had got the final piece in place. A global outlook now holds sway at Anfield. In December 2019 fans were given an early present in Takumi Minamino, the first ever Japanese player to represent LFC. Japan – another Axis enemy of 75 years ago. Happy Christmas. War is over.