



It's the day after the night before and I have a headache. Not because of wild celebrations but because what happened at Camp Nou last night still doesn't make sense. The score doesn't quite match what I saw. I think dark magic was in play, I'm still not sure.

Liverpool, the team that lost 3-0 actually played much better than the score suggests but at no point, even when Barça were without possession of the ball for long periods, did I think that FC Barcelona would lose. Dark magic.

This team is different. There's no soft centre, there's very little real weakness, they are more equipped than ever before to soak up pressure and they are both mentally and physically prepared to go all the way. Ernesto Valverde has learnt his lessons from last seasons UCL defeat at Stadio Olimpico. Liverpool really didn't do much wrong, they just didn't have the magical thing we have, Lionel Messi.

Before the season started, Lionel Messi made a promise to the crowd at the Gamper trophy game vs Boca Juniors. He promised the fans, in his first captain's address to Camp Nou and his adoring public, that the target for this season was to win it all, the priority being the Champions League trophy. I believe him. I like this version of Leo, he's determined, he's fiery, he's strong, he's a leader all mixed in with his absurdly otherworldly footballing abilities. I've never seen him look more focused. He's going to bring this trophy home. Last night he was the difference, for whatever team he plays for, he's always the difference. I've sat in Camp Nou hundreds and hundreds of times and I've seen him score more free kicks than I can remember but I still don't

have the words to describe the sensation and feeling watching that free kick hit the back of the net. It was perfect, literally inch perfect, it was into the only minuscule area that Allison couldn't reach. It was euphoric, it was transcendent, it was his 600th goal. There are no superlatives that haven't already been said or written, he just is Lionel Messi, the greatest of all time.

Even aside from Messi, it was an excellent team performance apart from a couple of areas. I promised myself next time I wrote about Philippe Coutinho I would try to be nicer but I'm not sure I can, the best thing he did was his contribution to the first goal. He created the space for Jordi Alba to run into and play an exquisite ball for Luis Suarez to score with a beautiful finish, who for his exuberant celebration will no doubt catch some heat from the home crowd on his return to Anfield. You can say what you want about Luis Suarez but he will give his all on the field. Gerard Pique and Clement Lenglet coped well with Liverpool's dangerous attacking threat. Sergi Roberto was solid to a degree, Sadio Mané and Andy Robertson had the beating of him every time which could turn out to be more of a problem in the 2nd leg. The surprise inclusion of Arturo Vidal worked out pretty well, his combative steel in midfield was a great asset. It gave the midfield more sustained energy than Arthur usually can provide. Also a word for Ivan Rakitic, who was quietly excellent yet again as was Sergi Busquets. The brief injection of pace from Nelson Semedo and even briefer from Ousmane Dembélé was much needed and will definitely be needed in the return leg. I'm not too critical of Dembélé missing a golden chance with the last kick of the game, he stumbled, it happens, I feel like he is going to be vital at Anfield.

I don't fear a repeat of Roma. I don't get that feeling. There is a strength and determination and more importantly belief in the squad, they believe they can win it all, they believe in each other and they believe in Ernesto Valverde. He's managed the squad effectively and efficiently this season. He's been better to react to in-game dips, and his game management has been largely excellent. Because of him this team doesn't lose. My only complaints from last night were he maybe should have introduced Dembélé and Semedo sooner but in the grand scheme of things, quite minor in retrospect. Valverde is on course to bring a treble to Camp Nou. A treble. What an achievement that would be.

