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Dr Jekyll and Mr Benitez

By

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EVERYONE knows the key plot point in Robert Louis Stevenson's classic novella about a man's examination of split personality. The ambitious Dr Jekyll, a mild-mannered scientist, swigs from a potion and turns into Mr Benitez.

No one is safe around this managerial maniac.

Peter Crouch, Jose Reina, even Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard can easily be sacrificed by the schizophrenic Mr Benitez.

He cannot settle on one personality. He cannot settle on one line-up.

Mr Benitez scribbles furiously, rants at referees, shows them two fingers and then unleashes his own monster. He removes its shackles and sends it out to wreak havoc.

Its name is Jermaine Pennant and the shackle used to be an electronic tag in his sock.

After each match, however, Mr Benitez vanishes and the soft-spoken, clip-board holding, student of soccer returns to stand before the camera.

In the quietest voice yesterday morning, he underscored the need for patience against Inter Milan in their Champions League encounter. We need a little patience, he whispered. Just try and have a little patience. Mr Benitez had transformed again, into Gary Barlow from Take That.

His schizophrenia knows no bounds. There are rumours on Anfield that a new No.2 might be brought in to assist Mr Benitez on the bench. There may be a greater temptation to sign a psychiatrist instead.

Who'd be a Liverpool supporter right now? They're experiencing more ups and downs than a weekend in Geylang.

Never take Mr Benitez to Geylang. His rotation policy would be exhausting.

But English football's greatest schizophrenic was back doing what he did best last weekend, providing material for people like me.

He dutifully ticked every box of the comedic coach in Liverpool's FA Cup clash against Barnsley. Rest the top goal-scorer? Check. Drop the goalkeeper? Check. Underestimate the importance of the occasion to the opposition? Check. Continue to believe that the FA Cup is worth little more than the trophy picked up at a school egg and spoon race? Check. Liverpool have won five European Cups. The town of Barnsley is famous for its modern bus interchange.

There was only ever going to be one outcome.

Liverpool 1 Barnsley 2.

It's the only scoreline in recent memory that gets a laugh just by reading it. If you're not a Liverpool fan and find yourself plodding through a tedious day at the office, just whisper to yourself, "Liverpool 1 Barnsley 2".

It makes me chuckle every time.

But the Reds were going well. Lose again at home to Inter Milan yesterday morning and the chuckle-fest could continue. With Liverpool at home to lowly, but improving, Middlesbrough on Saturday, neutrals might have been looking at an entertaining hat-trick.

Instead, Mr Benitez returned with a vengeance. Last Saturday, he fielded a side which couldn't beat a town with a nice bus interchange. Yesterday morning, Schizophrenic FC turned over Inter Milan, one of the finest teams in Europe, a side which had only previously lost once all season.

Of course, Marco Materazzi contributed to the proceedings by excelling in his usual role of pantomime bogeyman.

To spell check Materazzi's name quickly, I never Google what I think is the correct spelling of "Materazzi", I type in "Zidane's sister" instead.

It is so much faster. Materazzi gets almost as many hits as he would on a night out with the French squad.

Materazzi was guilty of two, fairly innocuous, challenges on Torres, but referee Franck De Bleckere, perhaps a fan of Zizou (or his sister), considered them both yellow card offences.

Mr Benitez certainly did, waving two fingers around frantically, looking like a cross between Winston Churchill, John Lennon and a Japanese tourist.

When the masterful Iván Córdoba went off with a knee injury and substitute Patrick Vieira looked more like a bad Patrick Vieira impersonator, Inter withdrew further and dug trenches deep inside their own penalty box. At that moment everything became clear. Barnsley could beat these guys.

Even Liverpool might have a chance.

For 85 minutes, Dirk Kuyt had played well enough to for Liverpool fans to really miss Crouch so it was inevitable that he opening the scoring with a deflected shot which, I think, is still bouncing somewhere on Merseyside.

Gerrard's arrowed drive in the dying moments preserved Liverpool's split personality for another week.

Liverpool 2 Inter Milan 0. Liverpool 1 Barnsley 2.

That's why the coach really remains at Anfield. No one knows which Mr Benitez to sack. When he hears, You'll Never Walk Alone, he really believes it.

The manager usually hears at least two voices in his head.