

Oh Henry

How could Arsenal top a 6-3 away thrashing of Liverpool? By winning 2-0 away to a Blackburn Rovers team on a goal-scoring run... with 10 men. That's what happened Saturday evening in the northwest of England, but that's like saying I had the best sex of my life last night. How do you know what it felt like?

Arsenal knew they were going to be in for a tough game at Blackburn. Blackburn had won four of their last five and scored ten goals in that stretch of games, which included Liverpool's only league defeat in the same stretch. They have a solid defense and a very solid goalkeeper, American Brad Friedel, who as he has gotten on in years and lost athleticism has compensated by becoming the best position keeper in England. He's also huge. Meanwhile, Arsenal were coming in with real momentum after their back-to-back demolitions of Liverpool, but also with the real knowledge that they hadn't gotten any leaguer points out of those games, which were both cup ties. Add to that the fact that Man United, Chelsea, and Liverpool all had bottom dwellers on the card this weekend and it was looking a little like a set-up for the Gunner faithful. A week of glory that leads to more disappointment and more slippage.

It was a cold and rainy day in the northwest of England, a region where Arsenal has a historically poor record. Wenger, early in the week, approached the questions about that poor record with his characteristic rationality, characteristic of his countryman Montaigne, by pointing out that "certain" clubs in England took the field to play well and others took the field to spoil the opposing team's effort. He then broke out this season's facts and figures on fouls, showing Arsenal at the very low end of the spectrum and letting the press draw their own conclusions about Blackburn Rovers, who are right up near the top of the table when it comes to kicking people down.

Only ten minutes into the game, which began as fast-paced and ugly as Rovers would have wanted, and an incident took place that highlighted Wenger's point in a way he could not have wanted. Gilberto had the ball with his back to the defense right around the middle circle. Robbie Savage, Blackburn's long-haired, spirited, Welsh defensive midfielder ran up Gilberto's back roughly. As Gilberto fell forward with the impact, Savage continued to kick, presumably he would say at the ball, at the back of Gilberto's legs, raking them with his cleats. He then stood over the fallen player as if to send a message. Gilberto, pissed off at this point, kicked out his leg at Savage as he was getting up. It wasn't a hard kick, but it was an obvious one. Savage fell over as if he'd been felled by an axe and started writhing around on the ground in mortal agony. Nobody likes diving, or the new theater of international soccer fouls. I understand where it came from and how it can be strategic. But this was complete horseshit. A rough and tumble Englishman like Savage playing up Gilberto's reaction to the tune of the roaring Blackburn faithful, and in addition to the 4,000 holes in Blackburn, Lancashire, add one big asshole by the name of Robbie. The ref, misinterpreting the situation gave Gilberto a red card and Arsenal were facing a long, cold rainy night in a hostile place with 10 men to their name.

No matter. We are a classy side and we had V. Persie, Henry, Rosicky, Hleb, Fabregas out there. Credit to Wenger that he didn't react to Gilberto's sending off by pulling one of those guys. He left all of our skill on the field, even though Rosicky is non-existent as a defender. It paid off when ten minutes before the half Arsenal's maintenance of possession earned a free kick forty yards from goal in the middle of the field. Kolo Toure came up from the back, beat his defender in with a short inside run, and mashed a header past Brad Friedel off of the inside of the left post for a goal. I cannot say enough about Toure. I want him where he is in the back, but whenever you see him around the goal, you kind of wish for his sake that he'd play in the center of midfield for someone. He shoots and passes as well as anyone.

Savage had a clear header at the other end just before half time but missed a yard wide. Karma police, arrest that man!

The second half started and the weather just kept getting worse. Arsenal began to cede possession of the ball, partially thanks to Mark Hughes putting the Turkish playmaker Tugay in the middle to orchestrate attack and partially because on the wet surface our guys were just getting really tired chasing. Wenger put in Flamini for V. Persie, adding some tough tacking to our middle and changing the posture to a more traditional 10-man shell.

Blackburn was pressing hard and you got the feeling that Arsenal were going to be lucky to get out with a 1-1 tie, a decent result in the circumstances but unacceptable to our position behind Liverpool in the table. What happened next may have saved Arsenal's season. It certainly preserved our 3 points.

It's difficult to place Henry in the pantheon of great players. He won't get the renown that Zidane and Ronaldinho will get. He'll wind up being considered, maybe like Luis Figo and Patrick Vieira, as one of the most dominant practitioners of his position over a long career. But if you are looking for Henry's superlative it's this: there is no other attacking player in the world a manager would want on the field with 10 men. Why? Because he has a huge heart, fast legs, great vision, and he is always deadly. Henry was defending magnificently, disrupting Blackburn's attempts to distribute from the back, running down long balls to eat up precious minutes from the clock, and making threatening runs at the seams to keep their back four pinned. All of that is the type of work that's hard to see on TV and that many fans don't look for, but it can be the difference in a game. What fans do look for is goals.

With about 20 minutes left in the game, Henry gathered a ball on the wing just inside his own half and took off at speed, running at the Blackburn defense. There were three defenders there to corral him but he'd gotten a good running start and was up to speed so all three ran back together and let him come, as they squeezed closer to each other and waited for him to initiate something. Watching Henry at full stride like that is breathtaking. I, and probably most Gunner fans, wanted him to do something magic, attack one of the seams and take all three defenders down. After all, that's what you do as a forward when your team is down a man, try to do something impossible. But Henry chose not to.

Fabregas was running to catch Henry down the center of the field. Instead of running at his defenders Henry slowed down slightly, allowing Fabregas to overtake him. The defenders, sensing their moment, closed in on him. He slipped a pass past them to Fabregas, who was forty yards from goal, and then he ran past all three defenders without the ball, continuing his run in an arc around Fabregas towards the corner of the goal box. Fabregas slipped a pass back into Henry's stride and Henry at full stride took the ball first time, sending a curling shot with considerable venom towards the top far corner of goal. Because he shot first time without looking, Friedl was caught by surprise. He was still in a good place though and leapt for the ball. He could only get his fingertips to it and it splashed into the very top corner of goal.

In one incredible show of experience, determination, and skill Henry shut up the 4,001 holes for good and sealed victory.