

GRIM DEFENCE NEAR TO AN AWAY POINT

by CHILTERN

66/67

Tranmere Rovers 1, Luton Town 0

MAIN trouble of the Town at the moment in away matches is that the forwards are not obtaining the goals to give the defence some margin for error.

As it is, and this was the case at Prenton Park on Boxing Day, the defence is fighting bravely, absorbing much of the weight of the opposition, but not quite able to keep the blank sheet that would guarantee a point.

Indeed, they took something of a battering in the first-half when they faced a very strong wind with the aid of which the goal and clearance kicks of the tall Lancashire cricketer, Cumbes, carried three-quarters of the length of the field.

More than that, they swirled dangerously in the air so that they were most difficult with which to deal.

Even so, aided by some grand saves by Read, including one that almost brought down the house from a free-kick by King when he hurled himself to his left, kept them on level terms until the interval.

At that stage, the main part of the battle seemed to have been won and the Town viewed with some confidence their chances of going one step further in the second-half, with the wind to aid them.

In the event, things did not work out that way because the Town forwards, always closely marked, and facing a defence that covered quickly, could not harness the prevailing element.

They had had few clear-cut chances and the best fell to Riddick fairly early on in the first-half when he was sent through by a sweeping pass from Whittaker.

However, the reaction of Cumbes was too quick for him and the goalkeeper saved a dire situation at the expense of a corner which Kevan met with his head and Cumbes saved again.

DASH OF FORMER TOWN TRIALIST

However, by comparison, Read was much the busier goalkeeper and he saved the notable efforts from Yardley who showed speed and dash such as he never revealed during his month's trial with the Town.

Read kept out an unexpected overhead kick from this player who also back-headed the ball only inches too high.

Just before half-time, Whittaker was injured, went off for attention for a few minutes, but the services of the substitute, Pleat, were not required.

During the interval, the more optimistic members of the Town party were thinking in terms of victory but, frankly, the forwards never played as if they would achieve that elusive first away success.

In fact, Tranmere continued to create the more clear-cut openings and one was squandered by Storton as he came through strongly and missed the far post by a foot.

Another opportunity slipped by following a free kick for a foul by Dougan on Williams when Yardley and Westlake both missed a low cross in front of a gaping net.

In retaliation, Whittaker, racing through after a defensive mistake, forced Cumbes to a brave save.

YARDLEY GOT VITAL GOAL

The vital goal came in the 66th minute and, to add insult to injury, it was YARDLEY who scored it.

Moore should have cleared in midfield, the ball was pushed through an inviting gap and Yardley was on it in a trice.

Ill-advisedly on this occasion, Read came racing out of his goal, quite ten yards, committed himself completely and, far from having the effect he hoped, it made it easier for the centre-forward to pick his spot.

Just before that happened, Yardley had collided with Westlake and needed attention.

There was certainly a fight back by the Town after this, but too many of their good intentions were ruined by inaccurate passing and a far too high proportion of passes was intercepted.

Even so, as the game entered its final phase, there were signs of anxiety in the Tranmere defence which was lucky on two occasions.

Each time it was Moore

who caused the trouble by following up strongly and from the region of the 20-25 yards mark, missing a post by inches, with Cumbes comprehensively beaten.

So, the Town were close to a confidence boosting point, even though the forwards misfired on this occasion.

Best of them was Kevan who worked tremendously hard without much support and who again demonstrated how effective he is in the air.

Unfortunately, there was not a great deal of response from his headed flicks, partly because Rioch was mostly shut out and suffered quite a deal of tough tackling.

Kevan, by the way, again wore the number eight shirt, with Riddick number nine, but immediately slipping into his midfield role which he did not perform so competently on this occasion.

Which was unfortunate because the Town were badly in need of a strong midfield link.

Neither French nor Whittaker received the liberal sort of service he is entitled to expect.

On the other hand they did not really make the most of

what came their way and accurate centres were few and far between which reduced the effectiveness of Kevan in front of goal.

DOUGAN STOOD OUT AGAIN

There could not be much complaint about the defence and to limit the very useful Tranmere team to one goal on their own ground was a good performance.

Once again, Dougan was outstanding with his authority and domination in the middle.

Quick and decisive, he was always difficult to pass and several times he came racing through to try to drive on the point of attack.

Next to him, I would place Slough for the complete effectiveness of his covering and the way in which he put the bustling Westlake out of the game.

Moore had a useful sort of game, apart from a tendency to be casual at times, but there was never any doubt of his whole-hearted endeavour.

After an uncertain patch, Jardine has come back to something like his best and even if Thomson could not follow the considerable and varied wanderings of Williams, he was staunch and hard-battling — a tag that could be applied to the defence as a whole.

In view of his first-half brilliance, and it was not less than that, it is a pity that Read should again have to shoulder the blame for an all-important goal. Unfortunately, his positional sense does tend to let him down.

TRANMERE ROVERS: Cumbes; Parnell, Martin; Storton, McFarland, King (A); Hill, Pritchard, Yardley, Westlake, Williams.

LUTON TOWN: Read; Thomson, Jardine; Slough, Dougan, Moore; French, Kevan, Riddick, Rioch, Whittaker.

Referee: W. Crossley, Lancaster.

Attendance: 6,806.