

Another point was Town's aim

BEFORE the testing spell of three away matches, Town manager Alec Stock probably had his sights fixed on four points, and would have settled for three. In the end, he had to be content with two, which was certainly damaging to the club's high ambitions.

Ironically, it was from the encounter that, on paper, seemed likely to be the most productive—at Mansfield, on Monday—that they drew a blank.

That came as a shock, following hard on the heels of an impressive display at Torquay, where the Town would have been far from flattered had they won.

Watched by an estimated 2,000 of their own supporters at Field Mill, they never suggested they could secure a winning position, and one point seemed to be the limit of their ambitions.

Probably they consider themselves unlucky in that the deciding goal came from the penalty spot, but the result emphasises the inherent danger of concentration on defence in an attempt to retain a point.

Tactics

The trouble is that the concession of a goal makes necessary a complete change of tactical plan, and, so often, a team finds the greatest difficulty in accomplishing the transition from deep defence to all-out attack.

The Town discovered it at Mansfield, where the plan, obviously, was to contain the home side at least for the first hour, and then go for a winner.

This was plainly indicated beforehand by the line-up, which had Billy McDermont doing the midfield job from outside-left that has been Freddie Jardine's recently.

In fact, Jardine would have been among the on-lookers had not it been decided less than an hour before kick-off time that Jackie Bannister would have to stand down.

Bannister, suffering from gastric trouble, missed his first match since joining the club, and Jardine had his first senior outing at left-back since he was injured at Plymouth on October 19.

The penalty

In the event, the change did little to affect the Town, even though it was Jardine who conceded the penalty in the 51st minute, when he used a hand to keep out a shot by Sharkey.

Those better positioned than I, held the view that the centre-forward's effort would have gone in. It came in a scramble after a partial clearance by Moore, and during which Roberts had a shot blocked.

Sharkey made no mistake from the penalty spot, and the Town had to re-adjust their ideas in a hurry.

There was always the intention to pitch in Mike Harrison when the time was deemed ripe, and this happened in the 59th minute, when he came on for McDermont.

The reason

Although there were those who thought Harrison should have been in the original line-up after his successful test with the Reserves on Saturday, Manager Stock bore in mind that that was his first outing for a couple of months, and doubted the wisdom of using him for the whole 90 minutes.

Harrison, as it turned out, could not work the hoped-for miracle, even though the Town sought to throw everything into attack in their search for an equaliser.

In point of fact, few clear-

Easter Monday line-up

MANSFIELD TOWN 1
Sharkey (pen).

LUTON TOWN 0

MANSFIELD TOWN:
Hollins; Pate, Hopkinson; Quigley, Boam, Waller; Keeley, Jones, Sharkey, Roberts, Goodfellow. Substitute: Frude.

LUTON TOWN:
Davie; Dougan, Jardine; Keen, Slough, Moore; French, Lewis, Allen, Rioch, McDermont (Harrison).

Referee: K Styles, Barnsley. Attendance: 8,681.

cut openings were created, though there was one mix-up in front of the Mansfield goal when Hopkinson hooked the ball away as Hollins was struggling to keep out a shot from Lewis.

Retaliation

This was followed by an incident between Keeley and Moore, with the latter retaliated, and the referee consulted both linesmen before deciding to take no action.

Davie, whose fitness had been in doubt after a head injury at Torquay, was hurt again in a collision with

Sharkey after Pate had pushed the ball through.

This time, the damage was to his side, but he made a quick recovery.

On Saturday morning, Davie had delayed concussion, which caused some sickness, and he spent Sunday resting.

Another Torquay casualty was Lewis. His ankle looked so swollen after the match that no one would have given much for his chances of appearing in the next game.

However, the application of ice worked wonders, and although he was still in the doubtful category on Sunday, he proved his fitness by cracking the ball to all parts of the Kenilworth-road pitch the following morning.

Insurance

As an insurance against the possibility of Lewis not playing, Ian Buxton was called on to go to Mansfield, but he had to be content with a seat in the stand, along with Terry Branston, George Potter, Bannister, and the injured Laurie Sheffield, whose ankle is making only slow progress.

There was not a great deal of support for Lewis, who did plenty of hard running and was booked for a foul on Hollins, whom he had been challenging persistently.

In the closing stages, the Town exerted heavy pressure, at times, leaving only Jardine and Davie in their own half, but an equaliser just would not come, though Lewis and Rioch had shots deflected for corners, and Harrison just missed the far post.

In the first half, the Town were scarcely in it as an attacking force, and Mansfield were much the more dangerous.

As early as the first minute, Davie had to make a great save to keep out a

header from Sharkey, and he also made fine clearances from Keeley, Goodfellow, and Sharkey again.

Taking the game through, few Town players enhanced their reputations, with French making a very quiet return after injury, and Rioch coming into it only fitfully.

Although there was plenty of hard work from Allen, who finished with a badly bruised ankle, there was no real domination in midfield, where Keen did not maintain the improved form he showed at Torquay.

Seldom was the build-up sufficiently constructive. Too many passes, particularly by Moore, were of the hopeful variety, and the strikers suffered as a result.

Once again, Slough did a useful job, though he tended to be out-headed by Roberts in the second half.

Even he went up in search of the point-saving goal, and one wonders whether, in these circumstances, the

presence of Branston on the field, might have been helpful.

Dougan had a useful game, but the only man against whom no criticism could be levelled was the gallant Davie.