

Town go all-out with three strikers

By ERIC PUGH

FOR A match the Town simply had to win to stay in the promotion race at Halifax this afternoon they were without Graham French, who while not exactly failing a fitness test yesterday, was not considered sufficiently recovered to return to the first team.

So, in effect, the Town fielded the team that lost so unluckily at Barnsley on Tuesday.

Substitute was Peter Phillips, who came in because Keith Allen who travelled with the party, still had seven stitches in a gash on the side of his left eye which he received in the Reserves' game at Fulham on Thursday.

Halifax had their troubles, and were without several experienced players because of injury or illness.

Their manager, Alan Ball, told me beforehand, "I don't know how I have got 11 players together."

I was inclined to take that with a pinch of salt!

It was true, however, that he had to complete his side by bringing in a 17-year-old amateur, Brierly, at centre-forward.

The pitch, while not all that heavy, was almost completely bare of grass, except in the corners, where there was the additional hazard of turf laid on boards to compensate for the curves which are allowed for the speedway racing which is the second string activity on this ground.

The Town following was around the 300 mark, but the attendance was very thin, and I doubt whether it reaches the 4,000 mark.

After the initial Halifax attack had been driven off, the Town came away through

MacDonald, who, however, was inaccurate with his pass, which was comfortably cut off by Pickering.

In the first couple of minutes each team had been caught blatantly offside, and one could only hope from the entertainment point of view that this was not going to be a general pattern.

Then Halifax came again, there was a free kick awarded on the linesman's signal for pushing by Branston, on Atkins, and it was in a dangerous position, two yards outside the penalty area.

It nearly brought the vital first goal, because Chadwick placed it cannily over to McCarthy, who headed it downwards, and Starling had to pounce like a cat on the ball as it dropped almost on the line.

DANGEROUS

For all their alleged weakness, Halifax have made a pretty encouraging start, had looked more dangerous than the town, who were not creating openings at the moment.

However, they did gain a corner through Busby, which was placed short by Collins to Ryan, and when the ball came over there was a rare old scramble in front of the home goal, before finally Slough put paid to it by slicing the ball wide with the outside of his foot.

Both teams were making mistakes in distribution, and a bad pass by Wallace was picked up by Slough, on the

target this time, but his shot had neither the pace nor the direction to worry the experienced Smith.

A very late tackle by Lee on Collins brought the Town a free-kick mid-way in the Halifax half, which Ryan placed high into the goalmouth.

MacDonald and Smith went for it together. The centre-forward was penalised for a foul, and the goalkeeper needed attention for a back injury.

Best chance that had been created so far came in the 16th minute, when Busby suddenly pushed the ball through to MacDonald, who converged on goal from an angle on his left.

He hit it hard, but unfortunately it lifted just a fraction too high.

It might even have scraped the top of the bar in its flight.

A number of mistakes in midfield was being made by Halifax, of which the Town were not taking full advantage.

Certainly, they were holding their own, but there was no real sign so far of the domination for which we had hoped.

A long kick down the middle chased by Atkins, who was challenged by Branston, brought Halifax a corner on the right, and it was Keen who headed clear as the tall Atkins went up to try to reach the ball.

From this there was a sharp break by the Town, when

TEAMS

HALIFAX TOWN:
Smith; Burgin, Lee; Shawcross, Pickering, Wallace; Chadwick, Robertson, Brierly, Atkins, McCarthy. Substitute: Verity.

LUTON TOWN: Starling; Ryan, Bannister; Slough, Branston, Moore; Collins, Busby, MacDonald, Keen, Harrison. Substitute: Phillips

Referee: W. S. Castle, of Sedgley.

Slough came through strongly down the wing, but Smith anticipated his centre, palmed it down and hurriedly collected the ball.

TENSE

There was one tense moment for Halifax when MacDonald, who obviously could outpace Pickering, did so when Slough pushed the ball down the middle.

Fortunately for the home team there was a quick reaction by Smith, who raced to a point two yards outside the penalty area to block MacDonald's shot with his foot, and finally kick clear.

Halifax were looking vulnerable to the long pass down the middle, which possibly Starling realised, because the next time he gained possession he booted the ball high upfield,

in the direction of MacDonald.

It did not quite pay off, because Pickering met it with his head, sent it back towards Smith, who had to scramble pretty fast out of his goal to prevent it going for a corner.

It was certainly not very inspiring stuff, with the ball not moving freely at all, possibly because of a certain amount of deadness in the pitch.

As half-time neared, the Town became more consistent in their pressure, and Busby was a bit unlucky not to find his way through the massed home defence after he had weaved into an open space.

Generally, though, the finishing of both teams was sub-standard. Half-time:

HALIFAX 0
LUTON 0

First break of the second half was made by the Town, with Harrison closing inside on his right foot, with which he lofted the ball just over the far angle of the woodwork.

There was a somewhat more workmanlike look about the Town attack in the brief time the second half had been on, and there certainly needed to be some improvement.

Again when Halifax came back, a long throw by McCarthy posed some problems for the Town until finally a shot by Atkins struck Slough and was deflected to safety.

With only four minutes having been played, I noticed that on the far side of the ground Alec Stock was helping Peter

Phillips off with his track suit.

The change came immediately, with Phillips going on for Harrison.

This was hardly unexpected because Harrison had accomplished little, nor had he shown much promise of doing so.

In effect, the introduction of Phillips gave the Town three strikers, and obviously there was going to be a bid for victory, which was certainly on if only the front line could find some thrust.

Certainly the Town were more purposeful in attack, and there was a half chance for Collins when the ball was pushed down the middle, but Smith coming out quickly beat him to it.

Halifax hit back when Lee came through to make an awkward centre that dropped just too high.

Halifax were by no means out of it, and Starling was hurt when he collided with Atkins in going for a high ball from Robertson.

Again, there were an anxious few seconds while the trainer came on, but the goalkeeper quickly recovered.

Then with the second half at its midway stage came the miss of the match by MacDonald.

Busby, who was purveying some late through passes, did so again.

Pickering missed his kick completely, leaving MacDonald with only Smith to beat,

although a defender was converging on him on each side.

Instead of planting the ball firmly into the back of the net, as I certainly expected, he placed it close enough to Smith for the goalkeeper to push it out, and gain possession at the second attempt.

Now there was some desperation about the Town's attacks, as they tried for the elusive goal. Collins, however, made a worthy attempt with a fine drive from three or four yards outside the penalty area, that Smith finger-tipped over the top.

With the game now in its last quarter of an hour, there was a great deal of urgency about the Town's attacks, but still not a great deal of improvement in accuracy about finishing them.

TROUBLE

A flurry from Halifax brought a scramble in front of the Town goal. Ryan did well to tackle McCarthy firmly as the ball came over from Atkins, who was again prominent, and for just a few seconds the Town were in trouble.

There was a quick counter-attack, with Phillips picking up a loose ball on the left wing, closing in for goal and bringing Smith to his knees at the near post with a low, stinging drive.

With about a minute left, Halifax gained a free-kick for a foul by Busby, and from it came their best scoring attempt of the half.

Atkins swung on to the ball, and Starling did well to get down to it, and save.

Into injury time, and the Town's last chance came when they gained a corner on the left, which Collins went over to take. Branston went right upfield, but Smith got a hand to the ball to punch clear.

Result:

HALIFAX TOWN 0
LUTON TOWN 0