Vic can fit fine — and signs are good!

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LUTON TOWN 0, BIRMINGHAM CITY 0

THAT badly-needed first victory is still proving extraordinarily elusive to the Town but, at least, at Kenilworth Road on Saturday, the signs were more positive than they have been, that they are on the threshold of better things.

By ERIC PUGH

Points are being collected, somewhat laboriously, it is true, but not in sufficient number yet to set the pulses of their fans racing.

Yet, compared with this stage last season, they are only one point behind schedule, so it may well be that the Town can be regarded as somewhat tardy starters who will gather momentum as the season progresses.

That, at least, must be the hope and, on the credit side is the fact that several players are now finding their form of last season.

In this instance, manager Alec Stock singled out John Ryan, who has been rather struggling. Stock commented: "Ryan was looking much more like the dangerous full-back, with his thrusting runs, that he was last season."

Of course, the main interest on this occasion was focussed on the newcomer, Vic Halom, and my opinion was that, although he did not score, as he deserved to, he brought more weight and authority to the front line.

In the air

More than that, he was winning the ball far more consistently, particularly in the air, than we have seen from any forward so far.

To match in the air that strong, centre-half, Hynd, is something few leaders accomplish, but Halom did so, and he laid off the ball well without a great deal of response in the final half.

That period was fairly evenly contested, with Busby, Givens and Ryan all testing Dave Latchford. Yet it was to Birmingham that the more clear-cut chances fell and, on two occasions, Bob Latchford was badly at fault.

After nine minutes, he was left well placed by Nicholl's failure to clear, but he hit the side netting, and then, with nine minutes to go to half-time, achieved the near-impossible by lifting the ball over from inside the six-yard line.

Had he accepted either of these gilt-edged chances, the Town, who had been worried by the skilful midfield prompting of Smith and Campbell, would really have been struggling to avoid defeat.

As it was, they came back with great enthusiasm to have the better of matters after the interval when, undoubtedly, they should have ended the stalemate.

Anderson was deployed to give support to Halom in the middle, and obviously

LUTON TOWN: Read; John Ryan, Shanks, Keen, Nicholl, Moore; Busby, Slough, Halom, Givens, Anderson. Substitute: Court.

BIRMINGHAM CITY: Dave Latchford; Martin Latchford, Smith, Hynd, Ralphael, Campbell, Pearce, Francis, Connolly, Phillips. Substitute: Summerill.

Referee: V. James, York.

Attendance: 14,678.

it paid off, because these were the two who came nearest to getting the ball into the net.

Maybe, Halom would have done so anyway, had it not been for Anderson's intervention when the centre - forward headed goalwards a corner by Busby.

Whether it would have gone in can only be a moot point, but Anderson tried to make certain and only managed to turn the ball too high with his header.

That smacked of over-anxiety, which is understandable enough in the circumstances, and is a condition that will doubtless continue until the goals begin to come more freely than at the moment.

Next, Dave Latchford just got a hand to a point-blank header from Halom who, perhaps should have scored when he ran on to a through pass from Anderson, but the ball was smothered by Latchford, to whom due credit must be given.

In the end, Birmingham, packing their penalty area and stopping a rain of shots with sheer bodies, were happy enough to settle for a point.

Afterwards, manager Stock said: "We were brighter, but we still have a little way to go. However, I have no complaints, and I am not disappointed."

As were we all, he was much impressed by the way in which Shanks, playing in only his fourth League match, completely subdued his England youth teammate, Francis, a job for which he was specially detailed.

Undoubtedly, Shanks has made a tremendous impact since his promotion. Assistant manager Jimmy Andrews says: "He is perfectly built for a modern full-back. In addition, he is quick, intelligent, and hard tackling."

With only five goals conceded in six League games, no-one can fault the defence, in which I thought Moore was outstanding, and Nicholl reached peak form after a somewhat uneasy start, during which he was harassed by Bob Latchford.

Lively Givens

In midfield, the Town were adequate rather than dominant, with Givens perhaps the liveliest of the three. Slough showed improvement without achieving the command for which we are looking and Keen kept at it steadily enough.

In the long run, both Busby, who is now looking sharper and more incisive and Anderson, slowly gaining the necessary experience, will benefit from the influence of Halom, who certainly had no cause to be dissatisfied with his first outing in his new colours.

Top, Birmingham goalkeeper Dave Latchford just gets a hand to this header from Vic Halom, which nearly brought him a goal on his debut for the Town. Above, Halom is up there again as Latchford smothers this one. Right, Peter Anderson, who provided much of Town's forward support for Halom, is himself pictured following up fast.