

TOWN'S GLORY COULD YET PAY OFF

ERIC PUGH sums up
the epic Cup-tie

WEST HAM UTD 2, LUTON TOWN 1

WHILE glorious failure, gallantry in defeat, call it what you will, does not exactly send a club laughing all the way to the bank, there are some benefits, maybe intangible at the moment, which could show themselves in the future.

Briefly, Town manager Alec Stock put in perspective the narrow Cup dismissal at Upton Park on Saturday, when he said, "This was a day of pride but, unfortunately, bad luck does not count."

What benefits? Look at it this way. Basically, the Town are a young side, some members of which have not yet reached their full potential.

Surely, the memory of how they battled back from a situation at half-time that seemed very like an abyss of despair, will give them tremendous confidence for the tasks that lie ahead.

They have proved to themselves that they can join issue on level terms with one of the best footballing sides in the country, and what better boost could there be for their ego than that?

When both Stock and his assistant, Jimmy Andrews, claimed that the Town were unlucky not to have earned a second chance, they were by no means wide of the mark.

Had it come their way, I would have said that they deserved it for the way in which they found their form and themselves in a thrilling rally after they had been in danger of being over-run in the first half.

Just how close they came to bringing the Hammers to Luton for a replay, a muddy splotch on the angle of the home, woodwork showed, but that is something that must be reserved for later in the story of what was in every way a memorable, pulsating Cup-tie.

When someone, before the start asked me my opinion, it was that, if the Town could get through the first 20 minutes or so without disaster, and so form a solid foundation, they were really in with a chance.

Of course, what they desperately did not want was a goal against them almost before the game had got under way—in the 91st second, in fact.

Brilliant

That it was a brilliant piece of opportunism by England striker HURST is beyond dispute, because he raced through to head a

LINE-UP

WEST HAM UTD: Ferguson; McDowell, Lampard; Bonds, Taylor, Moore (Eustace); Redknapp, Best, Hurst, Brooking, Robson.

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

Referee: K. H. Burns, Stourbridge. Attendance: 32,159.

centre by Brooking, and the ball went in off the under-part of the bar, Read not having an earthly chance.

Almost immediately, there was a snap chance of wiping out the damage when Anderson made a centre from the left which neither Hindson nor Givens could reach, when a touch would have meant a certain equaliser.

Said Andrews: "West Ham can play when they get the chance, and that first minute goal gave it to them!" Then, he added: "We were as good as the second half as they were in the first," and that really was the story of the game.

Despite being deprived of Bobby Moore after nine minutes, when he was carried off with a numbed nerve in his leg after a perfectly fair tackle by Halom, the Hammers had plenty of scope during the first 45 minutes to demonstrate their flair and their ability to create consternation and danger.

Power in midfield led to much danger emanating from Hurst, Best and Redknapp,

Ego-boosting Cup bid at West Ham

and produced more uncertainty at the back than the Town have shown for many a long day.

While Nicholl battled it out bravely, his understanding with Moore was not so conspicuous as usual, and there were times when both committed themselves to the same situation.

Slough, too, was bothered by the speed and cleverness of Redknapp, and this led to the second goal after 25 minutes, when Hurst got his head to a centre, Read dived but could only push the ball out, and BEST came striding in to blast it into the net.

In the main, West Ham looked too sharp and fast for the Town, and there was the other marked difference, that they scarcely wasted a ball in coming out of defence. On the other hand, the Town tended to give it away by inaccurate passes, so that they were mostly under heavy pressure.

Hitting back

With Read not at all certain about leaving his goal-line, a number of corners was conceded, but through it all, the Town were trying to hit back with everything they could muster.

Nicholl was a bit unlucky to find McDowell in the way of one of his accurate headers from a corner by Hindson, and the only other cheering sights for the Town fans before half-time was a cross by Hindson at which Court hurled himself in vain, and a shot by Givens which went too high.

During the interval, the position must have looked grim to the Town players, but the advice to them from Andrews was to play it as simple as possible and push the ball around as well as they could.

Special task

In addition, Nicholl was to make Hurst his sole responsibility, and helpful in this respect was the fact that Best decided to spend much of the second half on the left flank.

There he was picked up by John Ryan, who did well throughout, and who stuck to his task against the burly Bermudian, despite being subjected to some pushing which the referee chose to ignore.

When West Ham launched an early attack in which Robson made a cracking drive that Read saved brilliantly at full-length, the portents for the Town did not seem all that bright.

Yet in the event that seemed, merely to increase their resolve and steadily they pressed forward more and more often to be rewarded by a great goal from GIVENS in the 54th minute.

A corner on the left was pushed short by Keen to Hindson whose centre was met squarely with his head by Givens racing in at top speed and Ferguson was left groping at thin air.

After that came the first signs of panic and loss of composure in the Hammers' defence, underlined when Nicholl headed only inches

A hectic moment in the cup-tie at West Ham. The Town pressure is on for an equaliser, with Court, Anderson, Halom and Hindson all positioned to press home an attack.

too high from a corner and both Court and Keen made screaming drives that would have opened up the game completely had they been inches lower.

Now it was the home team's turn to hold on grimly, but anti-climax seemed to have arrived in the 71st minute when the referee penalised John Moore for a tackle on Brooking when the ball was almost out of play.

Brooking stumbled over and the referee, amid protests from the Town, pointed to the spot. "An anaemic decision," was Stock's description.

In the event, justice was done because Hurst hit the ball with his customary power and height, just to the right of Read, who made a magnificent save and Robson shot over from the rebound.

Impressive

This was the second consecutive match in which Read had saved from the penalty spot and there was another at Sunderland, making a pretty impressive record. Certainly, Read showed all his considerable skill and confidence in the second half.

Having been granted a reprieve, the Town went all out for an equaliser, and were unlucky when Nicholl had a shot blocked and Court saw one clip the wrong side of the post.

But the greatest stroke of misfortune came eleven minutes from the end, when the ball came out from a strong raid to Hindson, whose effort agonisingly hit

It looks like Oxford here on February 5

IN all probability, the Town will fill the vacant date of Saturday, February 5, left by their dismissal from the FA Cup, by bringing forward their home League match with Oxford United, which was scheduled for Tuesday, April 25.

Wisely, they did the groundwork concerning this during last week, when Oxford agreed to the switch, but only if Cardiff City were still involved in the Cup.

At that time, that looked a long shot, because the Welsh team's win over Sheffield United was one of the shocks of the round. Had they gone out, Oxford wanted to visit them at Ninian Park for the game postponed on December 11.

However, Cardiff's success cleared the way for the Town's rearrangement which Oxford's manager, Gerry Summers, is expected to confirm today following a meeting of his Board last night.

Certainly, there seems no reason why Oxford should not agree because, like the Town, as the fixtures stand, they are committed to eight matches in just over a month at the end of the season, when interest tends to have become low.

With the Town definitely holding the chance of still riding on the wave of their unbeaten run in the League, there is a distinctly better chance of a big attendance on the first Saturday in February than on the last Tuesday in April.

Other than securing a friendly match as attractive as possible, which is not always a lucrative exercise, there seems for the Town no ready made alternative to the rearrangement with Oxford. If they hear today that agreement has been reached, it will certainly solve a pressing problem.

the woodwork and came bouncing out to safety.

In the last five minutes, the Town threw everything into attack, and Nicholl forced Ferguson to a great save before, in a West Ham breakaway, Redknapp hit the foot of a post and then shot high over from the rebound.

Memorable

And on that note of action ended a memorable match in which the Town shared the honours with their illustrious opponents, even if it did not show in the score-line.

To come back as they did, needed a high brand of courage and skill and a considerable amount of this was produced by the non-stop work in midfield of Keen and Court.

climbed heights that had not seemed possible early on.

Givens, who was used almost exclusively in midfield, was also seen to better advantage after seeming to have difficulty in getting into the game during the first half.

However, the man who stood out was Nicholl, for the way in which he mastered Hurst, who had threatened to tear the Town apart in the early stages.

More Freedom

The defensive change of plan gave Moore more freedom after the interval, and he played an integral part in the Town's revival by helping to begin attacking situations from the back.

With the pressure off, Slough looked a more assured player, too, and, in fact, the defence were able to demonstrate that their first half experience could mostly be attributed to the shock of that early goal and, the psychological advantage it gave their opponents.

While Halom worked tirelessly and with some success, best of the strikers was Hindson, once he began to receive a liberal supply of the ball as an orthodox left winger.

Mostly, Anderson found the close marking too much for him, and even his quickness on the turn did not enable him to make room for himself.

