How the shackles were fixed firmly on Middlesbrough

71/72

MIDDLESBROUGH 0, LUTON TOWN 0

IN view of their desperate need for points, produced by the improvement shown by the teams below them, the end justified the means in this drab Good Friday affair at Ayresome Park, writes ERIC PUGH.

Just as they did at Birmingham, the Town set out to contain the opposition, perhaps not quite so exaggeratedly, but it was always clear that their first consideration was not to concede a goal and to hang on to a point if they possibly could.

While their previous attempt at Birmingham went sour on them, with only 60 seconds left, a combination of eminently sound defensive work and some mercifully inadequate finishing by Middlesbrough enabled them to ease the worries that had developed about their position in the relegation struggle.

The one thing to do

So, while a case could be made out for the Town's tactics and, really, it was difficult to see what else they could have done without running the risk of making the home team a present of two points, I must admit that it does not make for exactly exhilarating watching.

Nor did the home fans who, of course, formed the vast majority in a sub-standard crowd of 11,720, make much attempt to hide their feelings, but their frustration was mostly directed at their own team and their distressing lack of poise and accuracy in front of goal.

Of course, no one could blame the Town for playing to their strong point which, despite the departure of Nicholl, is still founded in the back four, and it is a great tribute to the way in which Garner has overcome his comparative inexperience, in stepping at short notice into what was a struggling side.

In the three games he had had at this stage, he had been opposed by three of the better-known centre-forwards in the Second Division and prevented each from scoring.

Steadfast and quick

Once again, he was most steadfast, quick moving and good in the air, and the only sign of a chink in his armour came during the last few minutes, when he made a couple of untypical miskicks, which were not costly.

However, once again, the man who most helped the Town towards beginning their holiday programme with partial reward was Barber, who has established himself as a regular in a remarkably short space of time.

He is playing in the confident frame of mind that indicates that he is at last regarded as first choice.

The two saves I remember most both came in the second half and were effected by pure reflex action when, on each occasion, he dived to his left. One was from a header by Vincent, Middlesbrough's most dangerous attacker, especially with his in-swinging corners, and the other from McMordie.

The second I rate more highly, because the ball was blasted at goal, and Barber reached it one-handed at full stretch.

Although, generally speaking, Middlesbrough had more of the play, some chances came the way of the Town, without them being able to produce real evidence that the work in front of goal has become more decisive.

Anderson might have turned the game upside down in the second minute when Halom sent him through, but he took the ball too wide and too close to the deadline.

Middlesbrough's waste

Givens gave Platt one of his few difficult tasks, but the clear-cut openings fell to Middlesbrough, and were wasted by Laidlow, Hickton and Vincent.

Steady rain, making the surface greasy, did not help the standard of football and then, after 67 minutes, the Town sent on Moore for Givens.

This was predictable in that McMordie had been increasingly prominent in midfield, and the situation was tailor-made for the close marking qualities of Moore, who proceeded to shackle the Irish international.

Four minutes later, Stiles, who had been well below his Manchester United form, went off with a groin strain in favour of Downing, and then, late in the game, when Middlesbrough's dash had been effectively blunted, a couple of snap chances fell to the Town.

From the first, following a dreadful mistake by Jones, Anderson just missed the far post, and then he floated over a centre which was too high by quite a margin for Busby's head.

Anderson's probing

Of the front-runners, Anderson, with his constant probing, looked the most likely but, again, there was not a great deal of workable material for the strikers.

Busby was willing, and Halom's inclusion on the right-wing improved the work rate, even though he achieved nothing very spectacular.

The way in which Slough has settled into his new job of marshalling the defence has been something of a revelation, as well as having the merit of finding a place for the highly promising Shanks and, with John Ryan and Garner, they formed an impregnable back four.

Once again, the role of Keen and Court was more destructive than constructive, which had to be the first consideration, but which scarcely helps in the build-up of attacks.

That Givens was replaced was not a complete surprise, but he has had so many varying roles that it is perhaps understandable that he has looked out of touch recently.

The only booking came in the first minute of injury time when Craggs, who had been spoken to twice for apparent dissent, suffered for a foul on Anderson.

THE LINE-UP:

MIDDLESBROUGH: Platt; Craggs, Jones; Spraggon, Boam, Maddren; Stiles (Downing), McMordie, Laidlaw, Hickton, Vincent.

LUTON TOWN: Barber; John Ryan, Shanks; Keen, Garner, Slough; Halom, Court, Anderson, Busby, Givens (Moore).

Referee: F. M. Nicholson, Manchester.