

UNBEATEN RUN ENDS

Chances wasted so Southampton grab the points

76/77

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● The moment when a point went begging: Ron Futcher leaves Southampton goalkeeper Peter Wells grovelling and lines up a right foot shot at the empty net. But the striker skied the ball over the bar.

Match Details

SOUTHAMPTON 1, LUTON TOWN 0

Half-time: 1-0

TOWN: Aleksic; Price, Buckley, Faulkner, Paul Futcher, Chambers, Jones, Fuccillo; Husband (Geddis, 55 mins), Ron Futcher, Aston.

SOUTHAMPTON: Wells; Rodrigues, Peach, Blyth, Waldron; Holmes, Ball, Williams, Osgood; Channon, MacDougall. Sub: Hebbard, not needed.

THE GOAL: Alan Ball, 15 minutes, from low cross by MacDougall.

ATTENDANCE: 19,923, second highest in the division.

REFEREE: Brian Stevens, Stonehouse, Glos: annoyed the Town by booking Paul Futcher for a foul that did not look very serious.

BOOKINGS: Williams of Southampton for his third serious foul, on Lil Fuccillo; Paul Futcher for a foul on Peter Osgood.

ENTERTAINMENT: In short supply, with too much scrappy play and too many passes misplaced by both sides.

few highlights of a poor afternoon's entertainment.

It was unlucky 13 for the Town after the unbeaten run of 12 matches, and McCreadie must have been puzzled by the Town's form.

A major factor was in the team formation. Alan West was out of action because of flu, and Town manager Harry Haslam decided to replace him with Graham Jones, normally a central defender.

Haslam is paid to make the decisions, but I found it a surprising choice, especially in view of the fact that Ricky Hill, who was West's stand-in earlier this season, travelled with the Town party.

"You pick players for games," said Haslam afterwards. "I wanted strength in the midfield rather than a pure ball-player. Hill would have done a job for us, but he could not have played it as tightly as Jones.

"Jones did a good job, and don't forget he was up against players who cost hundreds of thousands of pounds. He was quick and he kept going throughout the game."

That's the expert's view. My own opinion was that at times Jones looked out of position, trying his hardest to do a job which did not fit in with his normal pattern of play.

Certainly the midfield was not as smooth and inventive as it can be, and with the defence always having to keep a wary eye on the forward dashes of MacDougall, Osgood and Channon, the Town rarely stretched the Saints.

I made Peter Rodrigues the man of the match. He kept John Aston reasonably quiet, and also set up the move for the winning goal.

It came after the Town had looked as though they would continue their winning ways. In the seventh minute Ron Futcher won the Town's first corner, and from Aston's low kick Paul Price smashed in a thumping drive. It beat Wells, but Rodrigues was positioned perfectly and cleared off the line.

The Town were looking good, but the picture changed drastically in the 14th minute. A Southampton corner was cleared and the defence galloped upfield behind the clearance.

Southampton's forwards went with them to stay on-side as Rodrigues collected the ball in midfield. He fed MacDougall on the left wing, and as the Town's defence scrambled back again MacDougall crossed hard and low.

Osgood tried to connect and missed, but that threw the Town's defence off balance, and Alan Ball, tearing in at top speed behind Osgood, shot first time to send the ball past Aleksic's left hand.

It was completely against the run of play—the goal had followed Southampton's first corner while the Town had already won four.

But things evened up after that MacDougall headed a reasonable chance wide, but the equaliser should have come before half-time. A mistake by Mel Blyth let in Aston. He made ground down the left wing quickly, but then delayed his centre much too long, and the Saints defence regrouped and cleared as Ron Futcher and Jim Husband waited in vain for the ball to arrive.

Husband made little impression in an attack that looked off-key, and was replaced by David Geddis ten minutes into the second half.

But the best chance of the match fell to Ron Futcher. A headed pass by Jones beat Southampton's square defence, and Ron raced through on his own.

His control was a delight to watch, and he left goalkeeper Wells sprawling. But with the empty net gaping invitingly Ron's coolness deserted him and he scooped the ball high over the bar.

A goal then, with seven minutes to go, would surely have been worth one point, but Southampton learned their lesson and shut up shop for the last few minutes.