

REF ANGERS TOWN AS FUTCHER IS SENT OFF

THE IMPACT of some strange refereeing decisions, culminating with Paul Futchter being sent off, came close to papering over the cracks in the Town's display at Oldham. But anger at the ref cannot hide the fact that despite him the Town should have won easily.

Kevin McNally, a Cheshire news-agent who is the only man to have sent off Bobby Moore, was the subject of a special pre-match warning to Town players. The burden of it was "Watch out, this bloke will do you for anything, even when you don't deserve it."

MISFORTUNE

And if that is a bit of an insult to a league referee, Town supporters will remember the last time we had the misfortune to meet the diminutive Mr McNally — at Burnley two seasons ago.

On that occasion he booked three Town players, and then had the mortification of seeing all three cleared on appeal.

This time, assuming he gets his reports right, the Town stand no chance of overturning his controversial decisions. The near-impossible lesson that players must learn is that referees are right in

Report
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football law even when they seem to be wrong by the normal terms of natural justice.

At the same time, while Town players seethed at Mr McNally, most of them were also angry at their own failure to cash in on periods when they had Oldham on the rack.

Injuries had wrecked the pre-match planning. Phil Boersma failed a fitness test, and Ron Futchter, his likely replacement, injured an ankle in a reserve game at Reading.

So there was no recognised centre-forward, and the Town opted for a flexible 4-4-2 system. John Aston and Jim Hisband did the front running, with any two or three midfield men breaking quickly in support.

It confused Oldham regularly, with Ricky Hill and David Carr looking the most dangerous as auxiliary forwards, and Lil Fuccillo bursting through for shots from the edge of the box.

Alan West completed the midfield section, and for most of the first half Town looked a class above Oldham. The passing was crisp and incisive, and West had the best 45 minutes I have seen from him for a long time.

While Oldham never had a shot in the first 40 minutes, the Town's bright build-up work was wasted in the penalty area.

Paul Price returned to the right back position and provided good service for his front men. Twice he put Aston through, and each time the winger cut inside past his marker. He might have scored twice, but one shot was saved and the other went over the bar.

INEFFECTIVE

Carr's enthusiasm and ability to anticipate movements was equally threatening to Oldham, but also ineffective. Twice he was put clear in the penalty area, and twice he lacked the skill to control the ball and get in a shot.

Meanwhile Price and Oldham winger Alan Groves showed signs of resuming the personal feud they began on the last day of last season.

After one clash they both escaped with a ticking-off when they might have been booked, and it was goalkeeper Milija Aleksic who

But striking failures give away the points

gave Mr McNally his first opportunity to demonstrate why the pre-match warning to players was necessary.

PURSUIT

Just before the interval a long clearance bounced towards the Town goal. Vic Halom was in pursuit with John Faulkner ahead of him.

The centre-half did what countless others do in the same situation, shielding the ball from Halom as Aleksic came out to gather. Halom was trying to barge through and the whistle went.

There was a roar of delight from the home fans when it was seen that Faulkner had been penalised for obstruction near the penalty spot. The player managed to stifle his protests, but Aleksic, who did not have the advantage of the Burnley experience behind him, found it too much to accept.

PROTEST

He protested, and was booked immediately, and whether Mr McNally's free-kick decision was right or wrong, the goalkeeper has little chance of rubbing that booking off his record.

For the free-kick, the Town lined up their 11 players in a wall almost on the goal-line, with Aleksic in front, and when the ball was touched on to Halom the defence in-depth scrambled the shot clear.

But the game turned round after the interval. West was less effective and Aston faded after seeing a deflected shot scrape the wrong side of the bar.

SWIRLED

We thought the problems had reached their peak when Oldham scored in the 57th minute. Les Chapman hoisted a long centre towards the far post. It swirled in the wind, Aleksic misjudged it badly and, to everyone's amazement, the ball crept into the top corner.

Oldham came more into it, and there was little sign that the Town could carve out the sort of chances they had already wasted.

Then came the start of Futchter's troubles. He was penalised for a foul and made a gesture of protest. Mr McNally booked him, having taken no action earlier when Halom and Edwards of Oldham had done the same thing.

Two minutes later Futchter tackled Groves from behind and Mr McNally rated that as a second cautionable offence.

Off went Futchter, and with him the Town's forlorn hope of a point at least also vanished. Carr was moved back into defence and Faulkner went

up as centre-forward, but the game had been decided.

Mr McNally later booked Halom as well in a classic illustration of how some referees react differently from others. Halom had tried to steal the ball from Aleksic as the goalkeeper bounced it for a clearance.

He was penalised, and everyone laughed at Halom's cheek in trying the sort of trick George

Best once made famous on TV against Gordon Banks.

Halom joined in the merriment, and I would think 99 referees out of 100 would do the same—enjoy the joke and get on with the game.

Not Mr McNally. He decided that Halom had been guilty of dissent, and booked him to complete his "hat-trick" for the day.



● Skipper Alan West, who returned to the Town side at Oldham after his season in America.

Match Details

OLDHAM 1 LUTON TOWN 0

Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Aleksic; Price, Buckley, Faulkner, Futchter; Carr, Hill, West, Fuccillo; Husband, Aston. Sub: Jones, not used.

OLDHAM: Ogden; Hoolickin, Holt, Edwards, Hurst; Bell, Blair, Chapman; Valentine, Halom, Groves. Sub: Shaw, not used.

THE GOAL: Chapman, 57 minutes, with attempted centre which swirled into the top corner.

SENT OFF: Paul Futchter, for the second time in his career, for tripping Groves two minutes after being booked.

BOOKED: Milija Aleksic and Vic Halom, of Oldham, both for dissent.

ATTENDANCE: 7,579 — three gates in the Division were lower.

REFEREE: Kevin McNally, Hooton, Cheshire. Even Oldham officials thought he was below par. Town views on his performance are unprintable in a family newspaper.

ENTERTAINMENT: Faded badly after a bright opening by the Town.