

ATTACK SMOTHERED AND ENTERTAINMENT KILLED

77/78

**REPORT BY
BRIAN SWAIN**

FRUSTRATED TWICE over — by their own striking failures and by the visitors' defence in depth — the Town lost their flair for goals against Blackburn. And even manager Harry Haslam had to admit at the end that the Rovers had done a good professional job to take a point.

But paying customers surely deserved something better from both sides.

Blackburn boss Jim Smith made no apologies for his side's negative tactics. "We knew we could be up against it at Luton," he said. "We knew we would have to fight for a point, and that is what we did."

From their point of view, I suppose it was a good result to dent the Town's 100 per cent home record. But for me, it was a return to the sort of soccer that drives crowds away.

Blackburn's whole policy seemed to be based on fear. They were not just frightened of losing—they were frightened

of playing football with any sort of enterprise.

Several times I found myself counting players in their penalty area. And time and again the tally was nine Blackburn defenders and seven or eight Town attackers.

The pity of it all was that the Town, for all their eagerness, ran out of ideas.

Across the Atlantic they are mucking about with soccer's rules to prevent draws because they know that crowds want goals.

I've a great respect for our British game and its rule book, but after seeing Blackburn I now have a little more sympathy with the American approach.

Haslam conceded: "Blackburn came to do a professional job, and they did it well. But I wouldn't want to see us play like that."

Nor would I. And I found it all the more galling that the Town could not give the mis-named Rovers a lesson in the major art of the game, scoring goals.

Both sides had their difficulties. Blackburn lost back-four man Graham Hawkins with a groin injury in the 15th minute and had to re-shuffle their team. They did it by shifting a midfield man back into defence, and then pulling back their other midfield men to join him.

That left the Town in control of almost the whole pitch. Alan West's absence with a pulled muscle enabled Ricky Hill to take command of the midfield.

He took over responsibility with some brilliant touches, tantalising opponents with deft footwork and dictating the attacking pattern. For my money it was the best performance he has ever produced in the league.

Unfortunately David Carr did himself less than justice, and Lil Fuccillo could not produce his best consistently.

The smothering blanket



of Blackburn's defence gave the front runners few chances, although Jim Husband and Ron Futcher might both have snatched goals with a kinder run of the ball.

Phil Boersma, however, could gain little satisfaction beyond the knowledge that at last he had stayed on for the whole 90 minutes. He looked as though he was still worrying about his hamstring and only rarely did he show the skills he is capable of.

It was all too hectic and crowded in the Blackburn penalty area, and while the game was not as boring as most 0-0 draws are,

the Town's superiority brought only frustration.

Blackburn cynically gave away the midfield and allowed the Town to attack continuously for the first 85 minutes. Our only consolation was that at that late stage the Rovers went close to pinching a point their tactics never deserved, and were thwarted.

The Town's defence was in danger of falling asleep after an easy afternoon when Mitchell got through for a shot from the edge of the penalty area. The referee ignored an offside flag and Milija Aleksic saved the day by pushing Mitchell's drive round the post.

● **ONE OF THE MANY:** Ron Futcher, on the left, watches as a header goes goalwards during the Town's non-stop assault on the Blackburn goal. He had drifted clear of Glen Keeley, who is between him and Phil Boersma, only to see Paul Bradshaw make the save look easy.

Picture by RON PURVES

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 0, BLACKBURN ROVERS 0

TOWN: Aleksic; Price, Buckley, Faulkner, Paul Futcher; Carr, Hill, Fuccillo; Husband, Ron Futcher Boersma. Sub: Smith, not used.

BLACKBURN ROVERS: Bradshaw; Fazackerley, Bailey, Keeley, Hawkins (Mitchell, 15 mins); Metcalfe, Brotherston, Hird; Lewis, Parkes, Wagstaffe.

REFEREE: Ron Challis, Tonbridge: kept the game flowing, and kept control when sparks occasionally threatened to fly.

ATTENDANCE: 9,149—still 2,000 down on last season's average at Kenilworth Road.

ENTERTAINMENT: Slightly better than the score-line suggests, but a game which badly needed a goal. Blackburn's defensive approach worked for them, but did little to give the crowd enjoyment.