

CHRISTMAS IS EARLY: POINTS GIVEN AWAY

DEFENSIVE slackness in the last six minutes cost the Town victory at Brighton on Tuesday at the end of a game which had been a pleasure to watch. The only consolation was that the night's entertainment had been a victory for football, with two sides producing a contest rich in skill and high in excitement.

We saw enterprise and initiative at both ends, a series of near-misses, a crazy penalty decision, and a "Roy of the Rovers" finale, with a sub going on and scoring twice in three minutes to give his side the points.

"If every game was as exciting as that football would have no shortage of customers," said Brighton manager Alan Mullery. "It was a hell of a game and Luton forced us into

Town go down in the last six minutes of a thriller

our best display of the season. They are easily the best team we have met."

Town boss Harry Haslam agreed with the general sentiment, but his views were clouded by the way the Town threw it away in the last six minutes.

"Brighton had gone. It was our game for the taking. And then Christmas came a bit early. They were only in it for four minutes of the second half, and we let them get two goals in that time. We did enough to take two points and finish up with nothing.

"When you score twice away from home and still lose you have to accept that something is wrong somewhere. Our lads know that they blew it."

From my viewpoint, it seemed that the Town got the measure of Brighton early on, fought back from a goal down, and then decided that a point was enough.

"I thought that too," said Mullery afterwards. "When it was 1-1 both sides were playing so well that I think both would have settled for one point."

For the first 80 minutes the Town had more than matched Brighton. Peter Ward had brought out the best in Paul FUTCHER, but John Faulkner was too strong for Ian Mellor, Brighton's other front runner.

Had edge

David Carr, still deputising for the injured Alan West, had a much better game than he did at White Hart Lane, and with Ricky Hill's skill flourishing and Lil Fuccillo battling strongly, the Town had the edge in midfield.

The only sour notes came from referee Brian Homewood, whose decisions were often puzzling and sometimes ridiculous.

His worst regular failing was in mis-use of the advantage rule, with Hill the chief sufferer. Several times Hill's control and body-swerve took him past attempted fouls, but Mr Homewood stopped play for free kicks, thus giving the offending side time to regroup.

Mr Homewood's failings hit rock bottom twice in

five minutes. In the 15th minute he gave Brighton a penalty by ruling that Faulkner had pushed Mellor in the back at the near post as both went up for a cross.

Even Brighton were amazed to see him point to the spot, and leading scorer Ward apparently found it all too much to believe—he cracked the ball hard, and it hit a chap halfway up the terraces.

Booking

Phile Boersma voiced the opinions of most of the Press box by suggesting that justice had been done, and was booked by the referee.

Five minutes later Ward, quick on the ball, and clever in control, whipped round Paul FUTCHER, who went back for a second time and brought the Brighton striker down from behind. This time, we all thought, it really was a penalty. Mr Homewood, however, decided it was not. Perhaps once more justice had been done.

Brighton's early thrusts subsided after that, and with Phil Boersma sparkling on the left flank the Town started to take control.

Ron FUTCHER and Jim Husband joined Boersma in a policy of switching positions, and Fuccillo began to provide a beautiful supply of through passes.

Ron FUTCHER should have put the Town ahead in the 38th minute when Hill and Husband combined to leave him free, inside the six yard box and with only the goalkeeper in opposition. It was a chance that had to be snapped up quickly, with a high volley or a low header, and Ron chose to use his boot. He scooped the ball high over the bar,

and Brighton escaped.

With 59 minutes gone, the Town were playing some delightful soccer, forcing Brighton to defend heavily and hope for quick breaks.

It was the reverse of the normal roles of home and away teams, but Brighton took advantage. Hill lost possession as the Town attacked down the middle, and Horton's clearance to the Brighton left allowed full-back Cattlin to go on an overlap run.

With the Town stretched, Cattlin made 20 or 30 yards, and then crossed over Faulkner's head to the far side of the penalty area. Ward was unmarked, and while the Town defence was at fault in allowing him space, his skill was admirable. He brought the ball down to control it, then placed his shot perfectly past Milija Aleksic's right hand to put Brighton ahead.

Attractive

The Town's reply was to storm back on to the attack, and Brighton had to defend desperately. For three solid minutes the ball stayed in their half.

Husband smashed in a 20-yard drive which flew off Steele's fingertips on to the top of the bar and over for a corner. Then Price and Husband sent Hill away and he drifted past two men and shot low for the corner, only to see Steele make another fine diving save. Ron FUTCHER had a drive saved, and later made a hash of a chance made for him by Fuccillo.

In a rare Brighton counter-attack Mellor threatened to go through on his own, but was body-checked by Paul Price, for which the Luton defender was rightly booked.

But Brighton were being knocked groggy by the Town's sustained attacks, and with 72 minutes gone their goal at last fell.

A move built up from defence ended with the Town winning a throw-in on the left wing. It went to Boersma and he, as he had done often earlier in the game, left full-back Tiler for dead and crossed accurately into the goal-mouth.

Ron FUTCHER timed his run-in perfectly, and headed the equaliser, and his first goal of the season.

At that stage, Brighton's big crowd was silent and

restive, sensing that their unbeaten record was ready for the chop. It was, but unaccountably the Town failed to maintain the tempo.

With six minutes to go, everyone was prepared to settle for the draw. Brighton's Steve Piper had limped off with an injury, and substitute Gerry Fell's introduction seemed to have done nothing to strengthen their formation.

But in the 84th minute the Town's defence was caught out by a routine set-piece. Brighton won a corner on the left wing, and Potts sent the kick to the near post. Mellor back-headed the ball across the face of the goal, and Fell had come through from midfield to meet it.

He was unmarked, four or five yards out from the far post, and scored with a careful header. Three minutes later Fell made it 3-1 when once more he was given a huge space to take a pass from Mellor and fire in a goal from the edge of the box.

That left only three minutes to go, but the Town were not quite dead. Within 60 seconds of the Brighton goal, Carr put Husband in possession in midfield, and Husband's pace beat two men in a run directly at goal. He ended it with a great low drive into the corner of the net.

Match Details

BRIGHTON 3, LUTON TOWN 2

Half-time: 0-0

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

BRIGHTON: Steele; Tiler, Cattlin, Winstanley, Lawrenson; Horton, Piper (Fell, 57 mins), O'Sullivan; Potts, Ward, Mellor.

THE GOALS: Peter Ward for Brighton, 59 minutes, given too much room in the box at the end of a counter-attack; Ron FUTCHER, 72 mins, header from pin-point cross by Phil Boersma; Gerry Fell, 84 mins, unmarked at far post for header from a corner; Fell, 87 mins, good turn and shot just inside the box; Jim Husband, 88 mins, shot after David Carr's through pass split the Brighton defence.

ATTENDANCE: 25,132, Brighton's biggest of the season, boosted by a loyal following from Luton.

ENTERTAINMENT: Rousing stuff, and a good game to watch throughout except for the disappointment Town fans had to suffer.

REFEREE: Brian Homewood, Sunbury on Thames; Didn't contribute to the night's pleasure. Regularly failed to apply the advantage rule, gave a penalty that wasn't, and didn't give one that was.

BOOKINGS: Phil Boersma for suggesting that justice had been done when Brighton missed a penalty; Paul Price for a body-check on Ian Mellor.