

FANS ARE LOSERS IN THE VALLEY OF FEAR



● **HAPPY DAYS:** Paul FUTCHER shows his delight at being back where he belongs, in league football, once more, less than 11 weeks after a car crash which almost killed him. After looking rusty for the first ten minutes, he settled down to play a major role in an impressive Town defence. "You can tell he's got class," said Charlton boss Andy Nelson. "He seemed to have time to spare in everything he did."

FOOTBALL RULED by fear frustrated the Town at The Valley, and short-changed the customers who wanted to see a little entertainment for their money. Charlton, crushed 7-1 on their visit to Kenilworth Road earlier in the season, settled for a point before kick-off, and in the end the Town had to do the same after their two best scoring attempts hit the woodwork.

Both sides found encouraging lessons to draw from the match. Charlton were delighted with their home draw because it ended a run of six successive defeats, and manager and players obviously feared the consequences if they were to lose again.

The Town had some justification for their claim that an away point is always worth winning, and they had showed that they can play it tight when they have to.

But the losers were the customers. If games like this are to become the normal fare even the diehard fans will be tempted to settle for Saturday afternoon shopping and a dose of TV soccer on Saturday night.

Charlton made their intentions clear from the kick-off. They lined up with four men stretched across the midfield, and when the game got going added a fifth, leaving only Mike Flanagan upfield.

The intention, presumably, was to control the game in the middle, and push men forward by building up attacks from the half-way line.

Charlton manager Andy Nelson admitted after the game: "We tried to put out a team capable of keeping a clean sheet, and we were delighted to succeed. The match might have looked disappointing, but this was the best we have played for six games at least."

I suppose you have to accept that when things go wrong for a team the result becomes all-important, and certainly more important than the way it is achieved.

Charlton were complaining at the end that they ought to have won 1-0. Nelson and his team were sure that Keith Peacock

was fouled in the second half when he flopped in the mud after a tackle by John Faulkner.

The referee and the Town team were equally sure that Peacock had dived.

And Charlton never deserved victory, because their creative limitations were exposed by the mid-field stalemate.

It took Paul FUTCHER ten or 15 minutes to settle down and adjust to the pace of league football again, and in that time Steve Gritt might have punished an early mistake, but shot wide from a good position.

The Town always looked more classy, and they produced the best moves of the game in a first half which saw Charlton looking groggy and unsure.

Graham Jones, moved to midfield to accommodate Paul FUTCHER's return, combined well with Jim Husband and Ron FUTCHER before sending an angled pass to Lil Fuccillo in the inside right position near the edge of the box. Fuccillo's low drive beat goalkeeper Jeff Wood, but hit the post and was cleared.

Another chance went astray when Jones lobbed a neat pass to Phil Boersma on the left wing. His low cross found Husband on the six-yard line,

Match Details

CHARLTON 0, LUTON TOWN 0

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

CHARLTON: Wood; Curtis, Warman, Berry, Dugdale; Tydeman, Brisley, Peacock, McAuley; Gritt, Flanagan. Sub: Powell, not used.

BRIGHT SPOT: Paul FUTCHER returned, 75 days after the car crash that might have ended his career for good, and played well.

ATTENDANCE: 8,267—Charlton's lowest since August last year.

REFEREE: Alex McDonald, Birmingham: Spot on, but Charlton thought he robbed them by not awarding a penalty when Peacock went sprawling as Faulkner tackled him.

BOOKING: Graham Jones, his second of the season, for trying to kick McAuley after the ball had gone.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very little, with an overcrowded midfield preventing both sides from producing open football.

FAREWELL: Harry Haslam's last game as Manager of Luton Town, after five years in the job.

but with his back to goal. He rolled the ball back into the path of Fuccillo, whose drive was deflected wide by a despairing block tackle by Alan Dugdale.

A minute before the interval Husband set Ron FUTCHER free on the edge of the box. He evaded a tackle and shot quickly, but the ball clipped the top of the bar and bounced into the crowd.

Charlton, who had rarely threatened the Town goal, picked themselves up in the second half, and began to take a slight advantage in midfield, and in turn they, too, had three reasonable chances which were wasted.

Milija Aleksic made a spectacular save to tip over a drive by Flanagan after a rare error by Paul Price. Keith Peacock was given too much space in front of goal for a free header, but Price covered well to clear after Aleksic was beaten, and soon afterwards Hugh McAuley shot over from a good position after he and Flanagan had worked the ball past Price and Paul FUTCHER.

For me, the pick of a hard-working Town team were the full-backs, with David Carr particularly effective.

He had his best game yet, working hard in defence and using a lot of common sense and energy in overlapping

to back up attacks, and looked as though he would fight off anybody's challenge to take over the left-back position.

Faulkner and FUTCHER took some time to resume their partnership of understanding, but were well in command long before the final whistle.

The midfield stuttered at times. Jones, included to give some much-needed bite in the tackle, was quieter than he can be after an early booking for a silly foul, but still played with a lot of thought.

Ricky Hill and Fuccillo both had mixed games, with flashes of class not lasting long enough to be really effective, and the attack was frustrated through being heavily outnumbered.

Bob Curtis marked and tackled Boersma almost out of the game, and all too often Ron FUTCHER was left to battle against the odds on his own.

Charlton's tactics proved to be too much for him, and for Husband as well, but the game can't have done too much to encourage Millwall manager George Petchey, who has to work out ways of going one better on Saturday.

If he can emulate Charlton's negative approach as completely as they did, the replay is at Kenilworth Road on Tuesday evening.