

FARCE ON ICE — AND A DISGRACE TO SOCCER

THE TV cameras might have showed how the Town lost at Ewood Park—but they didn't go half-way towards explaining why. Two men are the key to a defeat which ought to bring no criticism at all to a Town team which was asked to attempt the impossible.

Referee Bert Newsome made a terrible mistake when he ruled that the frost-bound pitch was playable. And it nearly gave him some of the responsibility for an incident which could have broken Lil Fuccillo's neck. For culprit number two was Blackburn defender Glen Keeley, whose shameful tackle on Fuccillo robbed the Town of one of their best players.

I could hardly believe my ears when the BBC commentator prattled away about the injury being caused by the condition of the pitch.

It has to be reported that it wasn't the pitch that got up and kicked Fuccillo five or six feet into the air. It was Keeley.

The incident happened four minutes before half-time, at a stage when both sides were showing a creditable ability to play some good football on the snow-covered ice-rink of a pitch.

Honours were about even, and as half-time approached the only serious question was whether or not Mr Newsome ought to allow the game to go on any further.

Then came Keeley's shameful lunge at Fuccillo. He charged in recklessly, taking the player instead of the ball. The challenge was so fierce that Fuccillo was pitchforked skywards, cart-wheeled in mid-air above Keeley's shoulders, and plunged head first to earth.

It was like seeing a swimmer dive into a pool with no water in it, and I feared that a very serious

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injury had occurred. Keeley was booked when he should have been sent off, and Fuccillo was carried off on a stretcher, and taken to hospital for treatment on a painful neck injury.

The fact that he was much better yesterday is no credit to referee Newsome or Keeley — just their good fortune.

Chairman of both clubs went to see the referee at half-time to suggest that the game should be called off then, but he said that the players were coping well enough.

So they were, and there were no quibbles from the Town side as Blackburn took command after the interval.

Up to half-time both sides had struggled to try to produce good football, and direct chances were rare. The Town's best was a shot from Fuccillo which John Butcher turned round a post.

Blackburn's Neil Brotherston seemed to be the one man on the field who could pick a sure-footed route forward, and was out of luck with a brilliant chip which left Milija Aleksic beaten. As the ball went into the net a linesman's flag was up for offside against two other forwards, and the Town escaped.

Ricky Hill and Ron Fletcher both had shots saved, and the Town looked well capable of at least a draw until Keeley's intervention.

Brian Stein took Fuccillo's place for the second half, and the Town were

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Match Details

BLACKBURN 2, LUTON TOWN 0
Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Aleksic; Price, Carr, Faulkner, Paul Fletcher, West, Fuccillo (Stein, second half), Hill; Husband, Ron Fletcher, Boersma.

BLACKBURN: Butcher; Hird, Bailey, Keeley, Fazackerley; Metcalfe, Waddington, Taylor (Round, second half); Brotherston, Hargreaves, Wagstaffe.

THE GOALS: Round, 69 minutes, header at the end of a brilliant movement; Brotherston, 83 minutes, neat chip after Paul Fletcher error.

REFEREE: Bert Newsome, Broseley, Shropshire: spoiled the day before kick-off. The match should not have been played. The pitch was frost-bound, as hard as granite.

ENTERTAINMENT: Surprisingly good, with both sides doing well to combat the conditions.

ATTENDANCE: 11,511—all very brave, or slightly mad, on a bitterly cold day.

TURNING POINT: Terrible tackle by Glen Keeley which put Lil Fuccillo out of the game just before the interval. Keeley was booked when he should have been sent off, and Blackburn got their goals later.

not quite able to match Blackburn in midfield from then on.

They varied the pattern between 4-4-2 and 4-2-4, but Blackburn proved to be more expert at getting men forward quickly.

Alan West, back in the side at the expense of unlucky Graham Jones, joined Hill in a fighting midfield display which suffered once Fuccillo was removed.

John Faulkner and Paul Fletcher were magnificent in defence, but slowly Blackburn began to take control.

A quick volley by Jim Husband might have put the Town ahead and changed the course of the game but, in the 69th minute, Blackburn scored a memorable goal.

Brotherston, rejected by Spurs and snapped up on a free transfer, was posing problems for David Carr, and played a major part in a sweeping move which took the ball from Blackburn's penalty area to the Town's.

He and Kevin Hird worked the ball clear as a Town attack broke down, and Brotherston opened up the midfield with a pass to David Wagstaffe.

A long cross-field ball set Blackburn moving down their left wing, and by the time Wagstaffe lofted a deep cross into the penalty area, seven accurate passes

had been strung together.

Blackburn had four men forward as the centre was launched. Aleksic tried but failed to reach the ball and substitute Paul Round sent a header looping into the net.

On balance Blackburn perhaps deserved a one-goal win for their second-half supremacy, but seven minutes from time a gift goal gave them a flattering margin.

Aleksic sent a short clearance to Paul Fletcher, and he rolled the ball straight to Brotherston. The Blackburn player produced an instinctive reaction bordering on the brilliant: with Aleksic off his line, he chipped a swerving shot into the top corner, with goalkeeper and ball ending up in the net as Aleksic tried vainly to cover his near post.

And to end a day of unreal events, the strangest came after the game was over. Blackburn manager Jim Smith paid tribute to the Town's players for their spirit and attitude.

He confessed that if one or two of them had started to slip and slide around after the interval, referee Newsome might well have abandoned the pantomime. Mr Smith should know — his own men did exactly that a year ago at Kenilworth Road.



The Town's man-of-the-match, John Faulkner, joins in the attacking action as his side tries to fight back from a one-goal deficit in the second half. But it was all in vain, and Blackburn made the points safe by scoring their second goal seven minutes from time.