

PRE-MATCH PLANNING

PAYS OFF AT STOKE

BY BRIAN SWAIN, SPORTS EDITOR

FOR THE FIRST TIME since David Pleat became manager, the Town were involved in a 0-0 draw at Stoke. Thanks to the manager's homework and preparation, and Milija Aleksic's sharpness in goal, the Town became the first side to bring back a point from the Victoria Ground since promotion favourites Bolton did it in February—also with a scoreless draw.

It was only the fourth time all season that Stoke had failed to score at home, from which it follows that the Town placed the emphasis in pre-match planning on keeping the Stoke attack quiet.

Stoke contributed to their own downfall by missing the best chances of the game, and by their tactical system—they used Viv Busby mostly in mid-field as the man breaking forward in support of a two-man spearhead, and Jim McNichol and Paul Futcher were able to cope with most of the threat down the middle.

The Town's midfield was sometimes pulled out of position in trying to cope with the extra opponent, but against that they put Stoke through their share of defensive agony by setting up some good moves on the break.

The problem for both sides was that there was not a striker on view able to snap up the few chances that were created, and although Stoke produced the best finishing Aleksic grabbed almost everything they threw at him.

Paul Price and David Carr both played their parts in keeping a lot of the Stoke danger at long range, although most threat to the Town's goal stemmed from moves down the flank.

The game had barely started when the first chance came and went: Paul Futcher was robbed by Gareth Crooks on the wing, and when a low cross found its way into the Town's goalmouth Busby, who has been in and out of the Stoke team in the last few weeks, shot too hurriedly and put the ball over the bar.

A weak defensive header by Alan West gave Paul Richardson a shooting chance, but Aleksic made a good low diving save, and when the Town hit back a smooth move involving Phil Boersma, Price, Paul Futcher and Lil Fuccillo gave Ron Futcher a scoring chance.

He beat goalkeeper Roger Jones, but Geoff Scott cleared off the line.

West, Fuccillo and Ricky Hill kept the Town in with a chance in midfield, but Brian Stein was rarely able to open up the Stoke defence and Boersma was the man who created an opening for Hill. The midfielder produced a powerful header, but Jones saved well.

A couple of minutes later a neat free-kick routine ended with Fuccillo's through-ball being headed into the net by Ron Futcher, but the goal was

Match Details

STOKE CITY 0, LUTON TOWN 0 77/78

TOWN: Aleksic; Price, Carr, Paul Futcher, McNichol; Hill, West, Fuccillo; Stein, Ron Futcher, Boersma. Sub: Jones, not used.

STOKE: Jones; Marsh, Scott, Smith, Dodd; Kendall, Waddington, Richardson, Busby (Cook, 77 mins); O'Callaghan, Crooks.

ATTENDANCE: 15,554—not bad for a game which meant little to either side.

REFEREE: Norman Midgley, Salford; kept very firm control, but might have made more use of the advantage law to allow play to flow more often.

BOOKING: Ron Futcher, his seventh of the season, for a silly late tackle on John Marsh.

ENTERTAINMENT: Better than the score-line suggests, but on goal chances Stoke ought to have won.

disallowed by a linesman for offside.

Crooks put a couple of chances over the bar, and Stein had a header saved, and for the first 30 minutes of the game it seemed to me that the Town were the better footballing side.

O'Callaghan, Stoke's big central striker, could make little headway against McNichol and the covering of Paul Futcher, and only once did he become a real threat.

Aleksic made his only serious mistake of the game when he got lost as a cross from the left wing went over. O'Callaghan met it with a deliberate header, but the ball hit the outside of the post and went wide. Aleksic more than made

amends with two flying saves to push efforts by Richardson round the post, and Stoke began to show signs of frustration.

The second half deteriorated into a confrontation marked "End of Season" at both ends of the field, and by the final whistle the major noteworthy moment had been Ron Futcher's seventh booking of the season for a late tackle.



Ron Futcher is banned

LEADING SCORER Ron Futcher, pictured in action above, will miss the last game of the season after being booked at Stoke. It was his seventh caution of the season, and took his disciplinary points total over 20.

It means that he faces a three-match ban unless he and the club decided to make a personal appeal for leniency.

If there is no appeal the ban applies automatically and starts 14 days after the last booking. Futcher will miss the game at Burnley on Saturday week, and then the first two matches of the new season.

But a plea for mercy may reduce the ban to just one or two games—the Football Association has been lenient with other players in recent weeks on the grounds that it has been a long season and men who have only just reached the 20-point total have in fact behaved better

than those who did it in fewer games earlier in the season.

The question of a personal hearing was still under consideration at Kenilworth Road yesterday, although it was admitted that there was no point in protesting about the booking itself.

Futcher knew before kick-off that he faced a ban if he did get booked—his six previous cautions had put him on 19 points.

John Faulkner had collected five bookings this season before he was transferred to America, but no other player on the Town's books has been cautioned more than twice in league games.