

DEFENCE MADE FIGHT OF IT

THE goal that decided the points was as unsatisfactory as the game in general when the Town lost an undistinguished confrontation with Newcastle at St James's Park.

On balance Newcastle just about deserved their first home victory since December last year, being slightly the better of two very ordinary teams.

But the Town's defence, marshalled with impressive authority by Chris Turner, deserved better. Newcastle's rearguard often looked suspect, but the Town had no-one sharp enough to make the final telling shot. The best news is that at least it was a marked improvement on the display at Crystal Palace.

The side showed two changes: Steve Sherlock was dropped at left-back, with Mark Aizlewood moving over to take his place and Paul Price going in as sweeper; and Alan West returned to midfield in place of the injured Lil Fuccillo.

The back four played well, despite the obvious determination of Newcastle's record signing, Peter Withe, to prove on his debut that he was worth the £200,000 fee Nottingham Forest collected for him.

He did a lot of running and bustling, but won nothing in the air against Turner, and in the end was forced to abandon his conventional centre-forward role and try his luck on the flanks.

He fared little better there, even though the Town threw defensive cover to the winds for the last 15 minutes, pushing Turner forward into the attack to try to snatch a point-saving goal.

The game was untidy in midfield, with Newcastle rarely prepared to play soccer in that department—they much preferred to bang loose balls forward in the hope that Withe would make something of them, or lay off chances for his colleagues.

It was all a bit hit-and-hope, but it worked when the only goal came in the 23rd minute, with luck going Newcastle's way.

The move started with a free-kick on the edge of the Town's penalty area. Hibbitt knocked it to the far post, and it looked as though Turner was fouled by Withe as both went up for it. Turner won the ball and conceded a corner and referee Michael Lowe saw nothing wrong with Withe's challenge.

When the corner floated over, Turner once more got higher than Withe to head clear of the crowded goal-

NEWCASTLE DETAILS

NEWCASTLE UTD 1, LUTON TOWN 0

Half-time: 1-0

BRIAN SWAIN'S VERDICT: * *

TOWN: Aleksic; Stephens (McNichol, 63 mins), Aizlewood, Turner, Price; Donaghy, Hill, West; Hatton, Stein, Moss.
NEWCASTLE: Mahoney; Kelly, Barker, Bird, Blackley; Cassidy, Suggett, Hibbitt; Pearson, Withe, Connolly. Sub: Walker, not used.

THE GOAL: Pearson header, 23 minutes, slightly lucky to get the right bounce in a goalmouth scramble.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: 13 by Newcastle, nine off target, four saved; 11 by the Town, eight off target, three saved.

ATTENDANCE: 24,112, including a handful from Luton who didn't have much to shout about.

ENTERTAINMENT: Patchy, with neither side looking promotion material on this form.

REFEREE: Michael Lowe, Sheffield: upset both sides at times through his unwillingness to play the advantage rule.

mouth. Cassidy tried a 25-yard shot which hit Paul Price and the ball, which might have bounced anywhere, fell to Suggett. He hooked it goalwards from somewhere near the penalty spot and Jim Pearson managed to deflect it into the net with a header.

From then on Newcastle were marginally better than the Town, but always in danger of being caught out, and failing to make the best of the chances they created.

But Mahoney in the Newcastle goal was never asked to make a testing save, with the Town's attack moving in fits and starts.

West produced some delightful through-passes, particularly in the first half, and Mal Donaghy showed signs of being able to break through from the middle and put the goal under pressure.

But there was an absence of a consistent ball-winner in midfield. Ricky Hill, not completely fit, was not mak-

ing the impression he is capable of, and David Moss got nowhere when he attempted to run with the ball.

Bob Hatton and Brian Stein had a lonely fight in central attacking thrusts. Both worked hard, and the Town might have equalised when Hatton put a deliberate

header into Moss's path on the far post, only for the ball to go a couple of inches too high for Moss.

He could not get above it, and sent his header high and wide with Mahoney stranded, and later, Stein snatched too quickly at a chance created by West and Hatton, and shot high and wide from the edge of the box.

Aleksic made a good save when an error by Price let in Pearson, and Hill, off balance, screwed another sharp chance narrowly wide.

Kirk Stephens was injured by a late tackle from Hibbitt and missed the final 27 minutes, but Jim McNichols' arrival maintained the Town's impressive defensive abilities.

Similar success at the other end might have made a world of difference, but on the day it was hard to begrudge the Geordie fans their pleasure—they had seen their team relegated last season and open the new campaign with two defeats. But more than 24,000 still turned up to cheer them on, and even if it was not a very impressive game, they weren't complaining.

Leaders ho

THE FIRST league tables of the season show the Town in 15th place in the Second Division in a list much distorted by the fact that many teams have played twice away and only once at home.

Stoke City are top, with the only perfect record—three played, three won, five goals scored and none conceded. Viv Busby got one of the two goals which beat Millwall at the Victoria Ground.

West Ham dropped their first point of the season in a 1-1 draw at Crystal Palace, and bracketed with them on five points are newly promoted Wrexham after a 1-0 away success against Orient, who had begun the season with two wins.

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