

AWAYDAY SHAMBLES TAKES THE SHINE OFF THE CUP GLOW

A BUNCH OF young Town supporters stood defiantly on the terrace at Boundary Park, Oldham, cheering and chanting to encourage their team. And a bunch of men on the pitch let them down.

On the ride home from Lancashire on Saturday night, I felt as sorry for those kids as I did for the team. They yelled encouragement for 90 minutes solid, and all they got for it was another wretched away performance, and the humiliation of cruel taunts from the home fans.

After the delights of the marvellous victory at Villa Park in the League Cup, the shambles at Oldham was hard to watch, and the Town's players were as dejected as their fans.

The only possible explanation—but not a valid excuse—is that the Town raised themselves to new peaks for the League Cup clash with Aston Villa. They were marvellous, outstanding, exciting and a cut above the First Division side.

Oldham, by contrast, is a Soccer backwater, a town and a football club struggling to retain its identity in a region dominated by Merseyside in one direction and Manchester in the other.

On the day, the humble Oldham workmen, with a record that was below par for the Second Division course so far, outshone the Town.

They won because they were quick and enthusiastic. I doubt if they have more talent or skill than the Town, but they didn't need it. They simply worked hard for each other, tried to concentrate

on playing the easiest passes, and never stopped running.

The Town seemed to be carrying a Villa Park hang-over, and it is hard to remember one decent movement they conceived. The passing was terrible and the score-line and tally of goal attempts tells its own story.

Oldham tried for goal 18 times to the Town's 10, and up to six of their efforts might have brought goals against a lesser man than Milija Aleksic.

He was the man of the match, if such a title can be conferred upon a loser. Some of his saves were breathtaking, and one in the last ten minutes provided a cameo piece which summed up the whole game.

Graham Bell, outstanding for Oldham in midfield, was allowed to dribble across the face of the penalty area before whacking in a shot which was heading for the top corner of the net. Aleksic took off like a champion diver from a springboard, caught the ball in mid-flight, and clung on as he fell—a save identical to the one Peter Shilton showed on television a day later.

Elsewhere on the field few Town players can be very satisfied with their performances. I made Mal Donaghy, restored to sweeper, which seems his best position, the pick of the defence, always prepared to go into the thick of the action and fight for the ball.

Mark Aizlewood was not far behind, although he and Paul Price were made to struggle at times as Oldham used long passes to try to get round the back.

Chris Turner, superman at Villa Park, too often found himself confronted by two central strikers in Alan Young and Vic Halom, and that attacking combination turned out to be crucial.

In midfield Lil Fuccillo and Alan West battled, but with Ricky Hill suffering from a groin strain there was not enough tackling power, and the service to the front runners was in fits and starts.

Oldham, knowing they had to fight to get away from the lower reaches of the division, seemed to be a yard faster all round, and once they had scored their first goal it was impossible to see how the Town were going to win.

Bob Hatton was marked

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out of the game, so much so that for the first time since he came he was unable to make a single threatening goal attempt, and with David Moss flitting in and out of the action, it was left to Brian Stein to provide most of the Town's lightweight attacking danger.

He had a couple of efforts saved and two off target, the worst being a golden chance to pinch an equaliser in the second half.

Moss got clear down the right wing, and having beaten his man delivered a perfect far post cross. Stein and Hatton were both spare, and the ball fell nicely for Stein. You could see him take aim as he jumped to meet the ball, but he put his header a few inches wide of the post, with goalkeeper McDonnell having no hope of getting to it.

The Town had fallen behind in the 27th minute to a goal which was symptomatic of their lethargic performance. Turner had the chance to end an attack by winning the ball in the penalty area, and elected to play a gentle pass to the flank instead of using the big boot.

The ball ran for a throw-in, which was quickly taken to put Young in possession in the inside-right position. He made for the goal-line, and Turner committed himself to a sliding tackle.

Young evaded it, took the ball past Turner, then pulled a low pass back into the path of Halom. He was unmarked just outside the six-yard line and smashed a first-

Match Details

OLDHAM 2, LUTON TOWN 0

Half-time: 1-0

TOWN: Aleksic; Price, Aizlewood, Turner, Donaghy; Hill (Stephens 72 mins), West, Fuccillo; Stein, Hatton, Moss.

OLDHAM: McDonnell; Wood, Blair, Hicks, Hurst; Bell, Chapman, Gardner; Halom, Taylor, Young. Sub: Heaton, not used.

THE GOALS: Vic Halom, 27 minutes, close range chance after Young rounded Turner on the by-line and pulled the ball back; Steve Taylor header, 79 minutes, from Gardner's centre, when the Town had begun to push upfield in search of an equaliser.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Oldham nine off target and seven saved, six of them very good saves by Milija Aleksic; Town six saved and four off target.

BOOKINGS: Mark Aizlewood and Mal Donaghy for fouls.

ATTENDANCE: 6,876, including a good contingent from Luton who expected a much better game after the lovely night out at Villa Park.

REFEREE: Mark Scott, of Nottingham: One of the youngest on the list, and on this performance destined to become one of the best.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very average Second Division, with the Town never really looking capable of ending their dismal away league record.

time shot into the roof of the net.

From then on the Town were second best in everything, and only heroics by Aleksic prevented a flood of goals.

Oldham might easily have taken full revenge for the six thumped past them on the first day of the season, and two of the best saves, from Young and Steve Taylor, had to be made after defensive errors gave the ball away.

Hill went off to make way for Kirk Stephens in the 72nd minute, and the Town changed formation in the attempt to alter the course of events.

Stephens went into the defence and looked as good as ever, with Turner going upfield as an extra forward.

It was at least a positive attempt to bring new life

into a team that seemed to be gently subsiding, but Oldham were the side to benefit.

They adopted the long-ball simple approach. With the Town always trying to push forward, and a linesman whose offside decisions occasionally looked suspect, Oldham still looked the better team, and they wrapped it up in the 79th minute when Taylor was allowed a free header from Gardner's centre to make it 2-0.

The victory was no more than they deserved, but those of us who watched the same 11 players in Town shirts at Villa Park still found it very difficult to take.

The consolation must be that surely Newcastle United will be smashed out of sight at Kenilworth Road on Saturday.