

A NIGHTMARE GAME FOR ALL ELEVEN

CLUTCHING FOR straws of consolation on a day when his whole team let him down, Town boss David Pleat fended off criticisms of new £100,000 goalkeeper Jake Findlay after relegation-threatened Preston North End became the third visiting team to win at Kenilworth Road in the last four home games.

The temptation for disappointed Town supporters was to make Findlay the fall-guy for failing to make decisive contact with the two centres which brought Preston's match-winning goals.

But while he may have had a less than happy debut, Town boss Pleat put his finger on the real problem: "If you look at each man on our side I don't think there was any one who played as well as he can."

"It was a bit of a nightmare . . . we just didn't play."

Without looking brilliant, Preston deserved their second away win of the

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Report by
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season. They were a team which played in the manner of manager Nobby Stiles when he was the midfield powerhouse of Manchester United and England.

Central defenders Mick Baxter and Don O'Riordan blotted out the Town's central attacking threats of Bob Hatton and Brian Stein, and David Moss was marked out of the proceedings for most of the match.

They competed with fire and determination in midfield, concentrating on closing down space whenever the Town got the ball in that department.

Denied time to make creative passes, Alan West, Lil Fuccillo and Ricky Hill could make little impression on events, and that was the crucial factor as Preston fought back from a goal down to win.

Paul Price had put the Town ahead with a thundering header, coming in on the blindside to meet a free kick by Fuccillo in the 16th minute.

The goal sparked the Town's best spell of the game, and another successful strike then might have laid the foundation of victory.

Defenders showed most signs of making another breakthrough with Mal Donaghy having a header saved and Chris Turner wasting a better chance by heading wide from a centre by West.



● **EQUALISER:** Debut goalkeeper Jake Findlay is sent the wrong way as Preston's Mick Robinson, No 9 in white, scores from the penalty spot.
Action pictures: STEVE TEMPLEMAN.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 1, PRESTON N.E. 2

Half-time: 1-1

TOWN: Findlay; Price, Aizlewood, Turner, Donaghy; Hill, West, Fuccillo; Stein, Hatton, Moss. Sub: Jones, not used.

PRESTON: Tunks; Taylor, Baxter, O'Riordan, Cameron; Burns, Coleman, Haslegrave; Potts, Robinson, Bruce. Sub: Wilson, net needed.

THE GOALS: Paul Price for the Town, bullet header from free kick by Lil Fuccillo, 16 minutes; Mick Robinson penalty for Preston, 30 minutes, after Mark Aizlewood saved a lob by Burns with his hands; Mick Baxter for Preston, 53 minutes, header from centre by Potts, Findlay failing in his attempt to reach the cross.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town six saved and four off target; Preston one handled on the line, two saved and two off target.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very poor, with the Town's midfield taken out of the game and a lot of kick and run from both sides.

ATTENDANCE: 7,036, lowest league gate of the season at Kenilworth Road.

REFEREE: Ray Lewis, Great Bookham, Surrey; quick on the black book, but not the least effective performer on the field.

BOOKINGS: Aizlewood for hands and four cautioned for fouls — West and Fuccillo and Preston's Taylor and Cameron.

But Preston kept cool, defended stubbornly and attacked with relish, using long balls and intelligent running by Mick Robinson. Centre-half Mick Baxter

also ploughed upfield to back up attacks in the search for gaps in the Town's rearguard.

He had found one in the second minute, when a well-rehearsed free kick routine put him clear in the Town's penalty area. Findlay made a crucial save, smothering the ball at Baxter's feet.

But both Preston's goals posed question marks over the Town's defensive cover. Each time Findlay left his line in positive fashion, but could not make a positive catch.

The manager put it down to first-match lack of understanding, particularly between Findlay and Turner.

Preston's equaliser came in the 30th minute. Findlay and Turner both tried to clear a centre, and Francis Burns picked up the loose ball and lobbed accurately for the top corner of the net.

Findlay was trying to get back through the crowded penalty area, but was beaten, and Mark Aizlewood palmed the ball on to the bar.

It earned him a booking and Robinson scored from the penalty.

From that point on the Town's play deteriorated,

while Preston's confidence grew.

Findlay had to show some of his £100,000 value, and looked a very useful acquisition as he and the defence tried to stem the tide of Preston attacks.

One particular catch, after Potts had robbed Aizlewood, was breathtaking, but the goalkeeper should never have been given so little cover.

The defence went through a spell of lethargic silliness, taking excessive risks near the danger area, and the quality of the Town's football hit rock bottom.

In the 53rd minute they got the punishment they deserved, when once more Findlay and Turner got in each other's way as a centre by Potts floated across, and Baxter headed a simple winner.

And Preston manager Stiles, in danger of being sacked little over a month ago, honestly admitted that his side's fourth win in five games had been achieved purely through hard work and application.

"We competed well and Luton didn't," he said. "We kept trying to play football even when we were a goal down and we got the result we deserved."