

POINT EACH IS FAIR ON TWO BRAVE SIDES

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Frost-bound pitch causes problems

CHASING THE Second Division championship, Stoke City came to Kenilworth Road on Tuesday to show what it takes to win promotion: experience, coolness under pressure and an all-round determination founded on concentrating most effort in getting the defence right.

And the Town, having gone through an inconsistent patch in the weather-hit last month, matched the ambitious visitors in every department. While a draw was a fair result, the Town looked slightly more like winners than Stoke after raising their game in the second half.

The pity of it all was that conditions went close to beating both teams.

By BRIAN SWAIN

Sports Editor

The pitch was bone hard and bumpy, and although many of them changed their footwear during the 90 minutes, players had to work hard just to keep their balance.

It was a tribute to their determination that a poor first half was followed by an entertaining second spell of 45 minutes. You could only think wistfully of what might have been if the two teams had been able to meet on soft green grass in spring or autumn.

Stoke boss Alan Durban took the general view after

the match: "A draw was a fair result. If either side had lost I am sure the losers would have started complaining about the state of the pitch. Certainly I wouldn't have liked to play on it."

To their credit, both sides kept plugging away, but could rarely prise open two competent defences.

Stoke looked the more impressive outfit for the first 20 minutes, but their threat never materialised into dangerous shooting chances.

Neither goalkeeper had a serious shot to save, although Roger Jones was relieved just before the interval to see a 30-yarder by David Carr scream a foot or so over the bar.

Carr, in the team because Mark Aizlewood had been released to collect a Welsh Under-21 cap, was one of the stars of the night. Much as I admire Aizlewood, I doubt if he could have done a better job in snuffing out the ball-playing skills of Garth Crooks.

On the other flank Kirk Stephens was even more impressive. His tackling was incisive, his use of the ball consistently effective, and his attacking efforts down the wing added a new dimension to the Town's strike force.

Turner and Price blotted out the threat of Brendan O'Callaghan and £175,000 Paul Randall, but Stoke's rearguard was just as positive at the other end.

Steve Taylor and Bob Hatton were forced to

struggle on a pitch which gave defenders a built-in advantage, and David Moss looked the most likely of the front three to break the deadlock.

But it was significant that the Town's best effort came from Mal Donaghy, whose driving power from midfield ensured that Stoke could never afford to relax their efforts in that department.

The second half was barely a minute old when he rapped in a 20-yard drive which would have been his first goal for the Town. Referee Ron Challis, however, ruled it out, saying that David Moss had handled before laying on the pass.

Moss and the Town players near him at the time denied it.

To balance the Town's eager activity in the second half, Stoke had two cultured defenders in Mike Doyle, who seemed to stroll through his duties, and Howard Kendall, another player of vast experience.

Durban claimed that he never had any worries about the Town scoring, and that his side could easily have pinched both points by their speedy counter-attacks.

His main justification for that was that seven minutes from time a poor clearance after a corner gave defender Alan Dodd an opening. His shot from the edge of the area through a crowd of players beat David Lawson, but Alan West was perfectly placed to head it off the line.

Neither side deserved to lose, and Stoke went home happy enough, having gone joint top with Brighton, and with Saturday's date in mind—they play rival promotion contenders Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park.

"It won't be any closer than this one," said Durban, with the air of a manager well pleased with an away point.



● ABOVE: Chris Turner beats goalkeeper Roger Jones with a header as the Town piled pressure on the Stoke defence in the second half. LEFT: The moment when Mal Donaghy thought he had scored his first goal for the club. His celebrations were cut short when it was disallowed because David Moss had handled. Pictures by RON PURVES.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 0, STOKE CITY 0

TOWN: Lawson; Stephens, Carr, Turner, Price; Hill, West, Donaghy; Hatton, Taylor, Moss. Sub: Stein, net used.

STOKE CITY: Jones; Dodd, Scott (Busby, 83 minutes), Smith, Doyle; Kendall, Irvine, Richardson; Randall, O'Callaghan, Crooks.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town one disallowed, three saved, three off target; Stoke three saved, three off target.

ATTENDANCE: 6,462. Pathetic — and a big loss on what it might have been on the original date, January 1.

ENTERTAINMENT: Far better than it might have been, on a frosty, bumpy pitch which made good football nearly impossible.

REFEREE: Ron Challis, Tonbridge. Very positive, even when he made mistakes, but he too had a difficult job.

TOWN'S LEAGUE POSITION: Thirteenth, with 23 points from 24 games.