

RELEGATION? NOT ON THIS EVIDENCE

78/79

NEWS OF the Town's third league defeat in eight days, at Roker Park on Saturday, must have sent shivers of fear through supporters who were not at the game. Relegation is a possibility, and obviously brought closer by Sunderland's narrow victory.

But I am convinced that on this form the Town will not go down, despite the difficult matches they face in the last month of the season. I went to Roker full of apprehension. I left full of hope.

Sunderland were much relieved to take the points with a 70th-minute scrambled goal when, for long periods, the Town had looked the better side, and certainly much more creative in midfield.

Their failing, once more, was in the failure to turn pressure into goals, although they were unlucky when Brian Stein headed into the net from an offside position.

Against that Steve Taylor, still unable to hit his best form, missed the clearest chance of the match when he should have collected a late equaliser.

Goalkeeper Jake Findlay, who had his best game since joining the Town, called the result "daylight robbery", and he certainly had a point.

Town boss David Pleat was disappointed at the result, but not at the way his team had played. And their refusal to give in, against the odds, must surely have encouraged the handful of supporters who made the long trip to Roker.

There was nothing more encouraging than the display of Forbes Phillipson-

New-look team gives Sunderland a fright

Masters, signed on loan from Southampton to take the place of Chris Turner, who has gone chasing dollars in America.

"It was a bit different from the Football Combination, but I enjoyed the game," said the 23-year-old centre-half.

His pleasure must have been all the sweeter for the way he bottled up the lanky Wayne Entwistle, who caused so much trouble to the Town when the teams met at Kenilworth Road in November.

Fair-haired, tall and solidly built, the new recruit reminded me of John Faulkner at his best, winning everything in the air, tackling like a tank and wasting little time in getting the ball away.

The other notable feature of the Town's performance was the steadying influence veteran Alan Birchenall exerted, always willing to drop back to help the defence, and also able to get counter-attacks moving at speed from midfield.

The game was a fascinating contest in terms of commitment and tactics, with both sides forced to reorganise and improvise because of injuries and substitutions.

Sunderland, already robbed of the services of leading scorer Gary Rowell through injury, had to change their formation after only six minutes when Joe Bolton had to go off with a groin strain.

Substitute Alan Brown, an attacker, was sent on, with Bob Lee dropping back into defence, and with four men packing the midfield.

Brown might have scored with his first kick when a through-ball from Mick Buckley caught the Town defence square for the first and last time in the match. Brown burst through and, with Findlay advancing at high speed, shot wide of the far post.

Shaun Elliott got in some crunching tackles on Brian Stein, and the intimidation came close to being cynically professional, but all the same the Town got round the back of defenders far more often than Sunderland did.

Kirk Stephens and Mal Donaghy were rarely beaten, and Sunderland eventually concentrated

By BRIAN
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most attacking effort on their right flank, guarded by Paul Price as stand-in for the suspended Mark Aizlewood.

But for a long time the famous Roker Park roar was stifled and half-hearted as the over-anxious home side failed to get on top, with the Town always looking better in the midfield build-up.

Alan West and Taylor both had shots charged down, and Barry Siddall made a marvellous save to cut out a clever centre by Taylor as the Town finished the first half slightly ahead on points.

And it looked as though they had delivered the perfect knock-out in the 48th minute when Stephens began a sweeping move from the back. His pass gave Ricky Hill the chance to make progress through a gap, then slot a diagonal cross towards the far post.

Hatton and Stein were both in position for it, and Stein tumbled headlong to leave Siddall helpless with a header. It looked a gem of a goal, but was ruled out for offside — the linesman's flag had been raised before the header was made.

At that stage I could not see the Town losing, and Sunderland's fans were decidedly restless. They started giving their own players the bird, and their reaction was to get even more tense as they failed to crack the Town's midfield

Match Details

SUNDERLAND 1, LUTON TOWN 0

Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Price, Phillipson-Masters, Donaghy; Hill, West, Birchenall; Taylor, Hatton (Carr, 56 mins), Stein.

SUNDERLAND: Siddall; Whitworth, Bolton (Brown, 6 mins), Clarke, Elliott; Docherty, Chisholm, Rostron, Buckley; Entwistle, Lee.

THE GOAL: Rostron, 70 minutes, when ball fell loose in crowded penalty area.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town six saved, two off target and one disallowed for offside; Sunderland one saved and six off target.

REFEREE: John Worrall, Warrington — made a couple of silly errors, but still better than the average.

ATTENDANCE: 23,358, and most of them frustrated Sunderland supporters until Rostron's 70th-minute face-saver.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good exciting game, with the Town contributing as much as the home side, and producing more quality in midfield, but not enough punch in attack.

BOOKING: Paul Price for a foul on Entwistle.

and defensive superiority.

But in the 56th minute Bob Hatton limped out of the action with a hamstring injury, and David Carr's arrival forced the Town to reorganise.

The side's balance and pattern of play, so smooth until then, lost its fine edge. Sunderland had been worried sick by Hatton's bursts, but when he went they decided to take a gamble in the desperate search for victory.

They pushed Lee back into attack, and played with only three men at the back. In the 70th minute they got the reward they scarcely deserved.

Buckley was put in possession down the right wing, and hoisted another lofty centre to the edge of the penalty area. For once there was no decisive clearance, and as the ball bounced loose from a crowd of players Wilf Rostron found himself presented with a fairly simple

chance and took it to re-charge the Roker Roar.

Price completed his unhappy afternoon by being booked for a foul on Entwistle, but with Hill and Birchenall pushing forward for the last 20 minutes, Sunderland were made to battle hard until the last whistle.

The equaliser should have come three minutes from time when Hill cleverly flicked the ball over the top of the defence. Taylor, just as cleverly, had seen the possibility and stormed through for a clear run at goal.

He got everything so very nearly right, hitting the ball on the run, on the volley, and Siddall was grateful that his hopeful dive saved the day—the ball hit his knees and the danger was cleared.

Price went close with a header from a corner shortly after that, and the final whistle was music to Sunderland ears.