

TWO CONTRASTING thoughts were voiced by manager David Pleat after the Town upset the formbook against promotion contenders Stoke City on Monday and earned a price-less away point to make up for dropping one on Saturday.

They did it through a defensive slog, using a sweeper behind the back four, and only two men in attack.

The plan came close to snatching both points, completely baffled Stoke, and was carried through with a much better commitment than we had seen against Millwall on Saturday.

After the game there was a justified

Stoke details

STOKE CITY 0, LUTON TOWN 0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Aizlewood, Phillipson-Masters, Donaghy, Price; Hill, West, Birchenall; Taylor, Hatton. Sub: Stein; not used.

STOKE: Jones; Dodd, Scott, Smith, Doyle; Kendall (Conroy 16 mins), Irvine, Crooks, Richardson; Randall, O'Callaghan.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town three saved and one hit the bar; Stoke one saved and two off target.

REFEREE: Arnold Challinor, Maltby—had to work hard at times when niggle crept in as Stoke's frustration grew.

ATTENDANCE: 19,214—and a lot of them left early when it became clear that Stoke were too predictable to find a way through a battling Town defence.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not exactly scintillating soccer, but a 90-minute nail-biter for Town supporters as a badly-needed point was taken off a side which might well be in the First Division next season.

BOOKING: Garth Crooks for fouling Taylor to halt a Town break when they had five men up against four defenders.

Defensive

feeling of elation in the whole Town camp, and manager Pleat deserved to share it.

But he also admitted that he would rather not have been forced to adopt such measures. "Deep down in my heart I believe it is negative," he said, with refreshing honesty.

"Certainly I wouldn't dream of using this kind of system at home. But we knew we had to do a job and earn at least one point, and we did it.

"And I wish we could play with that sort of spirit and attitude in every away match . . ."

Stoke, for all their promotion aspirations, eventually decided that they too would settle for one point.

Manager Alan Durban confessed that they were "too predictable" to throw the Town's defensive cover out of gear. Their only attacking idea was to knock the ball high into the penalty area in the hope that the tall Brendan O'Callaghan could out-jump opponents.

He couldn't, because Forbes Phillipson-Masters never gave him a yard of space. The big striker had only one half-chance, a far post header which he put over the bar, under pressure from the leech-like centre-half.

The other defence against Stoke's optimistic centres was Jake Findlay. He had to work hard to deal with

system draws string of promotion contenders

Reports by
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the stream of crosses, but was close to perfection, making only one small error.

He probably frightened the Town supporters a couple of times by advancing out to somewhere near the penalty spot to attack crosses, but he made the catch each time, and he well deserved his first clean sheet this year.

Stoke's major problem was that although they were able to command most of the midfield action, despite losing skipper Howard Kendall in the 16th minute, they could not find a clear view of the Town goal.

They contributed to their own difficulties by playing a 4-4-2 formation, which looked terribly short of ambition for a home team seeking promotion.

The Town gave David Moss a rest, adding Paul Price to the team as sweeper, and the smothering tactics, carried through with plenty of solid tackling from everyone at the back, kept Stoke at long range.

They suffered when Denis Smith became a limping passenger just before half-time.

The only real attacking excitement came in the first 15 minutes, and it was the Town who looked more likely to score with their quick breaks.

Alan West tried a 20-yard shot which was deflected wide, but in the seventh minute the Town produced a move as sweet

as any we have seen this season.

Ricky Hill, still not on the peak of his considerable talent, led a break from defence and Kirk Stephens, speeding forward as an extra attacker, took his pass on the right wing.

The full-back escaped the attentions of Crooks and whipped over a low, hard cross which Bob Hatton met at full speed. The goalkeeper was stranded, but Hatton had to stretch a little too far and the shot from close range hit the underside of the bar.

Shortly afterwards West and Hatton mounted another quick counter-attack with accurate passing, and with Hill charging forward in space goalkeeper Jones had to race 30 yards off his line to hack the ball clear from Hatton's pass.

Paul Randall, who was subdued by Mal Donaghy's tenacious tackling, had one good chance which he blasted over the bar, and Stoke's last serious attempt at scoring came in the 22nd minute when O'Callaghan's header went over the bar.

Stoke were always wary of the Town's counter-punch ability, particularly when Steve Taylor got moving, and in the second half they decided that one point would do them.

They slogged away against a Town side which held firm near the line of the penalty area, but refused to concede a single worthwhile chance.



● JAKE FINDLAY — Played a major role in the Town's draw at Stoke by commanding everything in his penalty area