

Away defeat is just like old times

79/80
(FLC)

THE PERFORMANCE at Gillingham on Saturday quickly dispelled the happy anticipation I normally have when a new soccer season kicks off. There was something all too familiar about yet another away defeat, despite the addition of two new players with a half-million pound price-tag.

The Town never looked like winning once Gillingham had gone ahead after only seven minutes and the Third Division club were safe when a penalty put them two up 17 minutes later.

The third goal, two minutes from time, was no less than Gillingham deserved for the way they were on top in almost every part of the field.

Manager David Pleat was "very pleased" with his new boys. But Tony Grealish, without the benefit of pre-season friendlies with his new club, never looked settled, and while Mike Saxby beat Ken Price in the air every time, Price still helped himself to two goals.

BY-PASSED

Ricky Hill worked hard without stamping his authority on the pattern in the middle, and Mal Donaghy, a class defender, was too often by-passed in his midfield role.

Kirk Stephens was easily the Town's best player, and all three goals stemmed from the other flank, with Mark Aizlewood's miserable afternoon including a foul on Damien Richardson which gave away a penalty.

Mick Barker scored from the spot, to add to a lovely goal in the seventh minute by Ken Price, who flashed a first-time drive into the net from Richardson's corner.

Jake Findlay impressed with the way he took command of his box, looking much more dominant and confident than he did when Chris Turner was in front of him.

His best save charged down a shot

by Jon Crabbe after the Gillingham man had burst clear past Paul Price. But Findlay was left stranded when he went for an over-the-top pass which led to the third goal. Terry Nicholl's chip over Saxby was flighted to perfection, and as Findlay committed himself Price steered his shot into the net.

The Town's real tragedy was that with David Moss rarely able to sparkle, Gillingham's goalkeeper did not have one save to make in the whole 90 minutes — his only scare was when Bob Hatton hit a post from a lovely pass by Grealish when the score was 2-0.

DEFLATED

A goal then might well have made all the difference, but the escape lifted Gillingham and deflated the Town.

The home side worked harder, and were much better organised as a team. Perhaps the Town really weren't all that bad — but they were made to look it by a Third Division club, and the spectacle was not a happy one for Luton supporters.

DETAILS

GILLINGHAM: Hillyard; Sharple, Barker, Overton, Weatherley; Crabbe, Nicholl, Bruce; Westwood (Funnell, 78 mins), Ken Price, Richardson.

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Aizlewood, Saxby, Price; Grealish, Hill, Donaghy; Stein, Hatton, Moss. Sub: Birchenall, not used.

THE GOALS: Ken Price, 7 mins and 88 mins; Mick Barker penalty, 24 mins.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Gillingham three off target and three saved; Town seven off target, one hit the post, none saved.

ATTENDANCE: 6,222 including a good contingent of patient Town supporters.

REFEREE: Gilbert Naphine, Loughborough — always in control.

BOOKINGS: Steve Bruce for over-the-top challenge on Kirk Stephens; David Moss for late tackle on John Sharpe.

ENTERTAINMENT: Provided by Gillingham.