



● **WELL AHEAD:** Centre-half Mike Saxby jumps to it to beat Trevor Christie to the ball in a rare Notts County attack.

COUNTY STIFLE GAME AS SPECTACLE

THE BIG contingent of Town supporters who made the journey to Meadow Lane got the result they wanted as their team eased its way through 90 minutes of thoughtful football to earn an away point.

As a battle of wits and wills, it was a fascinating match. But if you believe football is a game of high endeavour and all-out effort to stick the ball in the other side's net, you were out of luck, and I for one for short-changed by Notts County's negative tactics.

Manager Jimmy Sirrell announced that he was quite satisfied with the goal-less draw, which seems to me a direct reflection on his confidence in his team.

Incredibly, they looked like the away team, playing in a 4-4-2 formation which was always more interested in denying space to opponents than in making direct thrusts at goal.

I don't think the customers at Kenilworth Road would stomach it for long. Sirrell refused to admit that he had just seen his home team lose a point. "If you don't lose, you've got 42 games and 42 points to look forward to. Win one or two, and that's promotion form," he claimed.

That philosophy would soon be shown up if every team decided to limit its objectives, and the pity of Saturday's encounter was

By BRIAN SWAIN

that the Town really ought to have taken both points.

They played the better football, produced the sharper attacks and did at least look likely to entertain the customers.

County played as though supporters didn't matter, always happy to stifle the game, and they would have been punished for their lack of enterprise but for some outstanding work by goalkeeper Mike Leonard.

He was making his debut after being signed for £30,000 from Halifax two days previously to replace the injured Radojko Avramovic, who cost £200,000.

The young goalkeeper denied the Town a victory they deserved, in an amazing two-minute spell midway through the second half.

The first 45 minutes had been a bit of a yawn, with rare goalmouth excitement. Tony Christie had hit the top of the bar with a long-range effort for County and the Town's best shot came from Grealish, a 25-yard effort which Leonard tipped over.

The Town's midfield three were more than a match for County's four, and after the break the Town seemed to realise that they need not restrict themselves to the natural inclination to play for one point.

Bob Hatton and Brian Stein raised the pace of thought and action, and the County goal was lucky

to escape two minutes of siege which began when Hatton raced clear of Blockley on the left flank.

Leonard pushed Hatton's drive round a post, and when David Moss put the corner over the ball was half-cleared. Hatton met it from the edge of the box and delivered a shot that looked certain to score, with the ball bending in around defenders and seeming booked for a spot just inside the far post.

But once more Leonard rescued his side, with a dramatic dive to give away another corner. Stein made contact with that one, and once again Leonard went down to half-stop the ball, with Ray O'Brien completing the clearance off the line.

By contrast Jake Findlay had an easy afternoon, but was struggling when a swirling centre by Mair clipped the bar, and soon afterwards a cross by Hooks skipped off the top of Kirk Stephens's head and went for a corner off the top edge of the woodwork.

The only real danger to the Town's supremacy seemed to be that they would take life too easily, and their possession football to use up time provoked the slow hand-clap from home supporters.

Stein almost produced the perfect answer. His quick eye for a half-chance enabled him to take a pass from Stephens five or six yards outside the penalty area. He tricked three defenders by his close control, and shot low and hard, but a couple of inches the wrong side of a post.

It deserved better, just as surely as County deserved worse for their determination to stifle the match as a spectacle.

I thought Town manager David Pleat might have realistically wanted more than the one point he got. But you can't complain too loudly at picking up a point away from home, and for the away team at least 0-0 represents a point won.

"Notts County weren't too positive," he admitted, "and it was an easy day for us at the back. They back-pedalled a lot, which meant that we couldn't counter-attack which is one of the things we are good at."

"I thought we shaded the game, but at this stage of the season every away point is valuable, and on that form we looked capable of going anywhere and getting a point."

Match Details

NOTTS COUNTY 0, LUTON TOWN 0 79/80

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

NOTTS COUNTY: Leonard; Richardson, O'Brien, Stubbs, Blockley; Hunt (Benjamin, 73 mins), McCulloch, Masson, Mair; Christie, Hooks.

ATTEMPTS AT GOAL: Town five off target and six saved; County three hit woodwork, two off target and two saved.

ENTERTAINMENT: Interesting to watch rather than exciting, with both sides playing as though they were away from home.

ATTENDANCE: 9,582—looked and sounded as though the Town had their biggest away following so far this year.

REFEREE: Arnold Challinor, Maltby, Yorks — had a reasonable match, but was not always in the right place at the right time.

BOOKINGS: Kirk Stephens for a foul on Mair, the Town's eighth caution this season; Iain McCulloch for tripping David Moss.