

Sports News 1

Surprise packets stay top

DESPITE their hard-won point at Blundell Park, the Town dropped one place in the Second Division table by maintaining their average of a point a game.

They are in 12th place with eight points, four points below the nearest promotion place, and three points above the relegation zone.

Blackburn Rovers continued as the Second Division's surprise packets. Proud owners of the only unbeaten record in the division, they went to Wrexham and collected a 1-0 victory, thanks to a late goal by Duncan McKenzie. It left Blackburn clear at the top with 14 points from eight matches.

West Ham and Notts County both have 12 points, with the Londoners in second place on goal difference. They won 2-1 at Cambridge, with the home side's equaliser being scored by former Town player Tom Finney.

Notts County kept up their 100 per cent home record despite going down early on to Cardiff. They ran out 4-2 winners, which should put them in good heart for Saturday's trip to Kenilworth Road.

Sheffield Wednesday, who came up with Blackburn last season from the Third Division, moved into fourth place, with 11 points, by dishing out Swansea's first home defeat of the season.

Wednesday's first away win was achieved with a 3-2 victory, and a similar result entertained the day's biggest Second Division gate at Watford.

With 19,802 partisan supporters enjoying the action, Chelsea snatched the points in a see-saw battle. It was 0-0 at half-time, but five goals in a 13-minute spell left Chelsea manager Geoff Hurst more than pleased — he cancelled a planned scouting trip to Sweden.

Each side was in the lead before Chelsea scraped through 3-2 with two goals by Clive Walker and a 78th-minute winner from Colin Lee. It was Watford's first home defeat of the season.

CLAIMING THAT the approach to life and to football is different in the North than in the South of Britain, Grimsby manager George Kerr calmly admitted at Blundell Park on Saturday night that one of his players was "a bit of an animal".

A collection of cuts and bruises on various Town players will testify to the truth of that shameful admission — and it was a real achievement that all 12 players used by the Town were able to walk off the pitch unaided and with a point which had to be earned through physical courage.

They should have had two, because David Moss missed a second-half penalty, his first failure from the spot since he joined the Town.

If he had scored the Town would probably have held out against Grimsby's attempts to — intimidate them, and the best feature of the Town's performance was that the defence came through a rigorous roughing-up exercise without making a single major error.

CHANGES

It was all the more rewarding for them because Kirk Stephens was out of action with a knee injury. Mal Donaghy switched to right-back and Mark Aizlewood was recalled to left-back. They both played superbly, and with Mike Saxby and Paul Price back to their best in the middle Grimsby had little hope of improving their wretched recent record.

They had lost their previous three games, and had not scored in any of them, and physical strength was their only hope of getting through.

BASIC

They played a basic, hard-running game, with four men trying to pack the midfield and front runners hoping to get on the end of long forward

passes. They tackled like demons, willingly taking man and ball together if necessary.

Long crosses to the far post provided occasional threats to Jake Findlay's goal, but they were minor matters compared to the way two or three Grimsby players went in with studs apparently cocked, loaded, and looking for action.

FRANTIC

Referee Peter Willis did a good job in keeping on top of trouble, particularly in the second half when Grimsby's pace became frantic as they realised that their methods were getting them nowhere.

Ricky Hill, Tony Grealish and Alan West had to work hard in defence for long periods, and the Town were able to make little impact as consistent attackers.

Raddy Antic tended to try to take one man too many, and Brian Stein's football ability got short shrift against a team always prepared to give away free kicks.

SPARKLE

Moss looked the most likely player to produce the goal-scoring sparkle and it was a treat to see him playing much better than he had done recently.

The worrying factor for Town supporters was that while the defence looked compact and safe, the attacks were rarely incisive at the other end.

In the whole 90 minutes the Town had only two shots and one penalty attempt on target.

The first was in the sixth

minute, the product of some lovely build-up work through the middle and on the left by Antic and West. Moss was given a sight of goal in the inside-left position by West's pass, and after drifting clear of one attempted tackle had goalkeeper Nigel Batch struggling to beat out his low shot.

Price blocked a volley by Joe Waters, and Kevin Drinkell, once fancied by David Pleat, put a header wide as both sides struggled to make their efforts count in the penalty areas.

PENALTY MISS

The best chance came in the 47th minute when Moss went on a dribble towards the by-line in the penalty area. He got past one defender and fell down when challenged by Kevin Moore.

If the penalty decision looked harsh it was less controversial than some that have not been given when they should have been in recent games, but Grimsby were left off the hook anyway. Moss aimed for his usual spot, but hit the ball well wide of Batch's right hand post.

ALMOST

He almost made amends with a swerving, dipping 30-yard effort five minutes later, but Batch had enough time to get into position and flip the ball over the bar.

From then on the standard of Grimsby's play dropped as they produced extra aggression to ward off the possibility of being beaten by a team that was trying to concentrate on football.

Bill Crosby was booked for going through the ball and felling Donaghy, and

Garry Liddell produced a shocking challenge on Price. He went over the top, and Aizlewood led a posse of Town players who were incensed by the challenge.

I expected Liddell to be sent off for serious foul play and Aizlewood to go with him for violent conduct, but Mr Willis decided that a yellow card for each was enough.

Shortly afterwards Price was booked for dissent, when he complained that the game was going on while Moss was down injured, and the afternoon's worst incident came in the 73rd minute.

LUNGE

Grimsby's Bob Cumming had clattered one or two players, and he went in with a dangerous lunge to soften up Findlay. The goalkeeper had collected a through ball, but Cumming kept on running and raised his foot so high in a pointless challenge that Findlay went down injured through being kicked high on the thigh. The yellow card again seemed to me to be a lenient response.

Grimsby almost pinched both points with a late hook-shot from the edge of the penalty area by Liddell — it beat Findlay, but bounced off the bar and was scrambled away.

TROUBLE

If Grimsby had scored, the result would have been an injustice to football as well as to the Town. And if Grimsby's methods are the recipe for success the game is in deeper trouble than we thought.

But Mr Kerr did at least have the good grace to admit that he didn't think Grimsby would win the Second Division title this season. It astonishes me that it ever won the Third last time.

'Yes, he's a bit of an animal...'

IN ONE of the most remarkable after-match Press conferences I have ever listened to, Grimsby manager George Kerr admitted that one of his players was so physical that "he turns my stomach sometimes".

I could admire Mr Kerr for his honesty and frankness. But not for his attempts to justify including such a player in his side.

Grimsby had a couple of players who wouldn't last five minutes at Kenilworth Road, in a team that believes in playing football.

The man under fire at the press conference was Bob Cumming, who played as an auxiliary forward looking for the bits and pieces behind two front runners.

His worst foul was in the 73rd minute, when Jake Findlay fielded the ball. Cumming had been in pursuit of an over-long pass, and instead of stopping or running round the goalkeeper he barged straight in, boot thrust studs-forward into Findlay's body.

Findlay bore no grudges afterwards, and Cumming was lucky to escape with a yellow card—even Grimsby men in the Press box expected a sending off.

When the Grimsby manager was invited to comment, I expected him to express some regret, and perhaps threaten disciplinary action. But Mr Kerr said: "You can't control players' minds. He is a bit of an animal if you like... At times he is a bit crude. He turns my stomach sometimes, but you don't want to be hypocritical—I like him in my side. You need someone to go in, that's a fact of life."

Mr Kerr added that Cumming often left himself exposed to injury as well because of his style.

"I don't condone what he did," he added. "But I would rather have a player like that than the opposite number eleven."

If Mr Kerr meant that David Moss is not the strongest tackler in the game, fair enough. But if he really believes his crash-bang man is a better player than Moss, I'm glad I support Luton Town and not Grimsby.

He went into the game with an ankle injury, and Town manager David Pleat was happy enough. "I thought twice about playing him... but Moss on one leg is worth his place in the side."

Match Details

GRIMSBY 0, LUTON TOWN 0

TOWN: Findlay; Donaghy, Aizlewood, Saxby, Price; Hill, Grealish, West; Stein, Antic (Harrow 75 mins), Moss.

GRIMSBY: Batch; Czuczman, Crosby, Wigginton, Moore; Waters, Cumming, Mitchell, Ford; Liddell, Drinkell. Sub: Broly, not used.

STRIKES AT GOAL: Town two shots saved, six wide, including a penalty by David Moss; Grimsby eight saved, nine wide, one hit the bar.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not great, but an interesting clash of styles—Grimsby's cloggers won't allow many teams to play good football if this display is typical of the way they intend to fight to stay in the Second Division.

REFEREE: Peter Willis, Meadowfield, County Durham — quick, cool and impressive and his five bookings will all stick. He was always in control, yet lenient—Grimsby's Garry Liddell and Bob Cumming deserved red cards and so did Mark Aizlewood.

ATTENDANCE: 9,004 — and the home fans were delighted with Grimsby's basic football and crude tackles. I don't think the Oak Road end would have put up with it quietly if the Town played like that. Nor would I.

THE TRANSATLANTIC APPROACH

Entertainment the name of the game

CURIOSITY about the way the Americans have taken up soccer and changed its image attracted 4,142 paying customers to Kenilworth Road on Monday night to see Tampa Bay Rowdies open their English tour.

And if the result was a disappointment — the Town lost to a silly goal in the 77th minute — the American way of doing things was an eye-opener. The match became part of three hours of entertainment, and the spectators loved it... even the bits they couldn't understand.

US servicemen and families from Chickasaws provided the "supporting role" entertainment to give Luton a flavour of trans-Atlantic soccer.

I went expecting the extras to get in the way of the serious business of the night, and found myself instantly converted to the American approach. Fill in every minute to keep the crowd occupied and you won't get trouble was the way one of the Tampa Bay officials expressed it.

And with football in this country fighting for customers in a time of recession, I suspect a number of clubs will think deeply about what they see as the Rowdies take their message on to Birmingham City, Nottingham Forest and then to Ireland.

Some aspects of the night were a little Irish. After the players had been introduced one by one, running through a guard of honour formed by cheerleaders, we all stood respectfully for the two national anthems.

The Star-Spangled Banner was played first, and

customers and players alike were getting fidgety waiting for God Save the Queen to follow. The tape seemed to have got lost, so they stopped waiting for it when referee Ian Hemley decided it was time to get the game going.

A quick-time marching band from St Albans provided the rest of the music, and the night included two demonstrations of American grid-iron football.

It's a bit like rugby, but I regret to admit that I could not report further. The scoring system left me baffled, and the sleight-of-hand tactics seem tough on spectators — you could watch one guy running like the wind and being tackled, then realise that the ball was being spirited away at the other end of the field.

But it was all movement and colour, and there was some sort of pattern discernible when the second demonstration was put on at half-time.

At that stage of the proceedings the soccer English-style was 0-0, with the Rowdies showing a well-organised defence but very little in attack.

Alan West had a 25-yard

bender tipped over the bar, and Ricky Hill smashed a shot against the woodwork.

American soccer doesn't believe in 0-0 draws, and they showed us their shoot-out system. The ball is placed 35 yards from goal and attackers have five seconds to score, with the goalkeeper able to come off his line if he chooses.

Three from each side tried it. Farrukh Quraishi, a Persian-born Englishman according to Tampa Bay's media guide, beat Alan Judge but everyone else failed. Lil Fuccillo, given a warm welcome by the crowd, and Les Harriott, both shot over the bar.

Raddy Antic cottoned on to the system, and dribbled all the way, going round the keeper and scoring — but it took six seconds, one more than the time-limit.

Back with the old-fashioned football, a miskick by Mike Saxby led to the only genuine goal of an open encounter. If he doesn't get the credit for the assist, Peter Anderson will, because his through-pass started the move, finished expertly by South African Ntini R. Botha.

