

Fourth from the bottom

FANS BEWILDERED AS THE SLIDE CONTINUES

ABOUT 500 fanatical Luton Town supporters spent good money to travel to Preston to see their team in action. They came out of Deepdale looking shell-shocked after seeing the team slide to its lowest league position since returning to the Second Division five years ago.

I count myself as a Luton Town supporter, and like them I was stunned, bewildered and dejected by what I had seen.

"What's gone wrong?" was the question every Town supporter was asking. The third consecutive defeat was hard enough to take — much more difficult to stomach was the fact that the Town never deserved to beat a Preston team which looked Third Division material.

A one-goal away defeat may not sound too bad on paper. But it was a bit painful to watch as two teams lacking confidence made progress more through opponents' mistakes than by their own efforts.

Even the decisive goal was more luck than skill, and Preston manager Nobby Stiles was the only spectator known to extract genuine pleasure from a match of little entertainment.

SLIPPED

His delight was based on the fact that his side had slipped into the bottom three after five matches without a win, and his job was looking rocky. Saturday's victory, he admitted, lifted a little pressure as Preston leaptfrogged over the Town.

He added that Preston deserved the points because they were clearly the better side at creating chances, even if they were inept at taking them.

The Town dropped David Moss for the first time since he joined the club, and used Steve White as central attacker, flanked by Andy Harrow and Brian Stein.

The combination was not very effective, with White the only attacker to get in a serious shot.

MYSTERY

The biggest mystery was that the Town lost their normal style of quick accurate short passes after a promising start.

They had an early let-off when Steve Doyle burst through from midfield and got past Kirk Stephens. His centre was met by another midfielder, Gordon Coleman, for a free header. He put it straight at Jake Findlay when he should have scored.

For a spell after that escape the Town played well, working the ball carefully and methodically from defence to attack. The best chance arrived in the 18th minute, with White collecting a loose ball near the half-way line.

Alan West took his pass and picked out Stein to out out one defender. Stein flicked the ball on between two more opponents and White was clear, angled in the inside right

Two mediocre teams divided by fluke goal

BRIAN SWAIN REPORTS ON ANOTHER DEFEAT



position. He took careful aim, but goalkeeper Roy Tunks got his angles right and turned the ball round.

The rival midfields cancelled each other out for most of the game after that, and the Town defence was rarely in trouble except when centre-forward Elliott dragged Mike Saxby out of position, and put him under pressure.

Saxby beat Elliott in the air consistently enough, but as the game progressed the major difference between the sides was that Preston's midfield did more work in attack.

The general level of skill deteriorated, and the goal was typical of the afternoon.

UNLUCKY

It started with Mal Donaghy unlucky to be penalised for hands when the ball was driven straight at him on Preston's right flank.

The free kick was lofted into the area and after one half-clearance the ball ran loose to Elliott. He seemed surrounded by men, including a defender or two lying down, mis-hit his shot, and found himself the unwitting hero of the day when the ball snicked Donaghy's leg and bounced gently into the net, with Findlay sent the wrong way by the deflection.

WASTED

Things got worse after that shock in the 44th minute. Transfer-listed Alex Bruce showed why no big offers have been made when he wasted three good chances in the first 15 minutes of the second half, and as Preston's very basic long-ball soccer put them on top the Town's confidence vanished.

With just over half an hour to go Harrow, still looking inexperienced, was pulled off and the Town reorganised. Mark Aizlewood went on at right back, and Donaghy and Ricky Hill tried to push further forward on the flanks to give Stein and White more support.

On brief occasions the

system looked interesting, and the lack of goals from midfield might be overcome if the manager has time to work on it.

On the day, it might have sneaked a draw because Stein might have had a penalty when Tunks brought him down, and Donaghy produced a powerful diving header from a deep cross by Aizlewood which was only inches off target.

BOOKED

Preston were also caught out when Hill threaded a pass down the middle of the field to set White free. Blackley tripped him, and was rightly booked, but the yellow card was doubtless more welcome than an equaliser would have been.

And Preston nearly pinched a second goal four minutes from time, when the Town were unable to clear a corner, Paul McGee tried a shot, miskicked and found that he had delivered a perfect pass to Coleman. His volley was struck perfectly and accurately, and Findlay completed the match's one moment of real skill by tipping the ball over the bar.

WHY?

"Why can't they all play like Findlay?" was the bitter comment of one of the many angry Town supporters in the Deepdale car park afterwards.

The strange thing was that as we talked more no-one could find any one player who had suffered a real stinker. It was rather a case of the attack being below the required standard, and the team as a whole not getting things together.

And there is at least one mini-bus load of supporters who defect the tactic of playing the offside trap in away games.

It worked at Deepdale only because Preston were so bad that they couldn't score even when they beat it.

If the game as a whole was less than memorable, I shall remember for a long time the bewildered faces and comments from those Luton supporters I met in the Deepdale car park.

Match Details

PRESTON NE 1, LUTON TOWN 0

Half-time: 1-0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Donaghy, Saxby, Price; Grealish, Hill, West; Stein, Harrow (Aizlewood 57 mins), White.

PRESTON: Tunks; Taylor, Blackley, Baxter, O'Riordan; Burns, Doyle, Coleman; Elliott, Bruce, McGee, Subb, Bell, not needed.

THE GOAL: Steve Elliott, 44 minutes, weak shot, but caught a deflection to wrong-foot Jake Findlay.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town four saved and three off target; Preston five saved and six off target.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very limited, with both sides looking mediocre.

REFEREE: Pat Partridge, County Durham: very quick and very fussy and not the reason for the Town's defeat.

ATTENDANCE: 5,620 — smallest at any Town game this season, and not surprising. Preston charged more for Second Division relegation fare than Liverpool were charging for top First Division soccer 30 miles away.

DAVID PLEAT'S VIEWPOINT

I LIVED through a nightmare at Deepdale on Saturday, and so did our players.

Defeat must have been a disappointment for our supporters. Although it may not be much consolation to them, the pains of failure are felt even more deeply at Kenilworth Road by the people most concerned.

The first half in particular was painful for us. The pitch was like a sponge, with players unable to run and keep their feet. The game was littered with mistakes, and we had no real excuse for losing — we were diabolical.

In a way it would be easier for me and them if we had come off feeling that players hadn't tried. If that had been the case the solution would be obvious, and carried out immediately.

Perhaps some players get to a stage when they try a little too hard. Players know they have to give 100 per cent in every match, but when you have had a bad run it is easy to get into a state of anxiety.

JUDGMENT

I believe that the right time to judge a man's true character is to look at him in adversity. The same applies to football teams, and I am well aware that people will judge me. With three defeats on the trot, I am not a good manager at this moment in time.

Like the players, I have to accept that our present league position is not good enough, and we have all been working harder, and with more determination this week.

FEAR

The difficult thing for some players is to overcome the growing feeling that everything goes against you when things aren't going well.

You get to a point when you feel that everything you try is doomed to failure, and we have to knock that fear right out of sight.

I am not afraid to make changes in the team, and we all of us at Luton Town realise only too well that people who pay our wages through the



EXCLUSIVE: THE TOWN MANAGER'S COLUMN

turnstiles want a winning team to support.

The message has been put over loud and strong right through the different levels of the club this week. Three first team players were given a reminder of the facts of life this week when I put them into the reserve team for a Football Combination match.

It reminded them how hard reserve football can be, and was also a reminder that there are young players in the background desperate for a chance to have a crack in the league side.

Some of the youngsters could be in earlier than they expect, and certainly this week I shall be taking longer than usual to decide on the line-up for Saturday.

BIG CHANCE

The fixture list has been kind to Luton Town: we have a golden chance to play our way out of our bad patch with two home games in quick succession.

Shrewsbury will come to Kenilworth Road on Saturday fired with the sort of determination we have to find. Their league table position is slightly worse than ours, and both teams need the points to try to stave off the threat of further disasters.

SUPPORT

Swansea are our visitors on Tuesday night, and we remember only too well from last season that John Toshack is building a useful side there.

We have one big advantage for both games — home support.

to Preston last week deserve better football than we gave them, and I shall make what changes are necessary to ensure they get it.

And supporters can lay a vital role in putting Luton Town back on the upgrade in the next few days. If the fans really want to help us they will get right behind the team. Players know they have to fight their way out of the bad run, and good support can give them a lift.

For our part we realise that the supporters need to be given something to shout about.

BOMBING

We are preparing for the weekend with the realisation that we have to pick ourselves up, and work out our own salvation. We need more goals, and the basic tactic for us will be to get more players into the opposing penalty area — if you fill their box with spare men and the ball runs loose you have a chance of getting to the ball first.

That is what we will concentrate on, and I can promise the supporters this: our players will really be bombing on Saturday. They don't like being near the relegation zone any more than I do, and Saturday has to be the day when we make it clear to everyone that Luton Town are fighting fit, too good to be languishing in the lower reaches of the table.

We will be positive, and go for goals, and do our utmost to give our supporters the sort of display which will keep them proud to be Luton Town fans.

Reserves in a winning groove

FIRST-TEAM players Mike Saxby, Ricky Hill and Brian Stein found themselves in the reserves at Kenilworth Road on Monday night as the manager asked them to play themselves back into form.

With Mark Aizlewood and Raddy Antic also in the side, the Town's Football Combination run was stretched to eight games without defeat.

They are unbeaten since a 1-0 reverse at The Dell against Southampton in August, and have taken 44 points out of a possible 16.

Herbie Smith headed the winner against Leicester on Friday night, after Leicester had scored twice, once in their own net.

On Monday a cracking goal by Aizlewood proved just enough to

overcome an inexperienced Fulham side who might well have earned a draw.

Stein and Hill failed to stamp their personalities on the game, and Stein was pulled off in the 74th minute to make way for Godfrey Ingram. He lost a few friends by refusing to shake hands with his rival as they passed each other near the touch-line when the change was made.

Saxby had few problems against a lightweight Fulham attack, getting involved in the action at both ends of the field, having an attacking header saved at full stretch and seeing another cleared off the line.

The man regular reserve-watchers really love is big Herbie Smith, always keen and strong and liable to do something spectacular. He is still learning his trade, but increasing his claims for promotion week by week.

Ingram looked the classiest man on the field when he went on for the last 16 minutes—his first touch was a whiplash drive which was turned round the post for a corner.

Aizlewood's 30-yard drive in the 19th minute, hit hard and low into the corner, proved to be the winner, with the Town left off the hook when Mahoney missed an open goal in the second half.

Rob Walker, who is unlikely to be kept on when he reaches his 18th birthday shortly, kept the points secure in the last minute when he tipped a header by Mahoney over the bar.