

SATURDAY'S MATCH

Nice start—but it can be better still

THE FANS could hardly have had a happier kick-off to the new season as Brian Horton marked his debut with an impressive display to lead the Town to their first three points.

But manager David Pleat refused to read too much into one result, and I suspect that newly promoted Charlton will be a long way short of the best opposition we shall see at Kenilworth Road this season.

DISJOINTED LOOK

They even managed to score the second crucial goal themselves, and had the disjointed look of a team with six new recruits on duty for the first time.

Alan Mullery, their new manager, complained that the Town's goals came from mistakes which were punished, and that when the Town made errors Charlton failed to do the same.

On chances created, he added, his side could have picked up a point. He should have added that on teamwork and basic ability, they didn't deserve to.

Horton was the name on most lips at the end, and his forceful tackling and cunning use of the ball suggested that despite the age difference he is a better player than Tony Grealish.

Other players responded to his efforts, but the Town boss felt that the performance of Horton and the rest was not as good as it will be as the season progresses.

Godfrey Ingram was given David Moss's shirt and the attack was not always well balanced. Mark Aizlewood's runs and centres from the back were the most effective left-wing work, and if Horton's skill took the eye in midfield they may have been highlighted because others in that department, on both sides, were below their best.

HAMMERED WIDE

The defence made their work easy against a poor Charlton attack, and got away with living dangerously at times—Derek Hales hammered Charlton's best chance wide, and Paul Walsh hit a post when the visitors had a 15-minute spell of equality in the second half.

Charlton lacked the sort of finishing the Town found twice, with Steve White's second-half goal a perfect example of the difference between the two sides.

Horton won a tackle in midfield, threaded a through pass perfectly between opponents and White took the ball on, waited for the goalkeeper to start his advance, and then shot low into the far corner.

Mal Donaghy had got the Town's first league goal of the season, in the 22nd minute, with a late run and flying header from a corner by Horton. Nine minutes later Don McAllister, one of Charlton's debut men, lobbed a back pass from Aizlewood's cross into his own net.

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN 3, CHARLTON ATH 0

(Half-time 2-0)

TOWN: Findlay, Stephens, Saxby, Donaghy, Aizlewood, Hill, Horton, Antic, Stein, White, Ingram. Sub: Turner, not needed.

CHARLTON: John Phillips, Naylor, McAllister, Leighton Phillips, Harrison, Gritt, Walker, Lansdowne, Ferns, Walsh, Hales. Sub: Smith, used.

THE GOALS: Mal Donaghy, 22 minutes, diving header from Brian Horton's left-wing corner; Don McAllister own goal, 31 minutes, into top corner from Mark Aizlewood's cross; Steve White, 59 minutes, solo burst and low shot from perfect through pass by Brian Horton.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town 11 saved and seven off target; Charlton five saved, eight wide, one hit the post. Corners: 11-10 to the Town.

REFEREE: Derek Civil, Birmingham.

BOOKINGS: Gritt of Charlton for kicking the ball away at a free kick; Mal Donaghy for a foul on Walsh.

ATTENDANCE: 8,776—6,000 down on last year's first home game, although Watford were the visitors then. Nearly 2,000 below last season's average home gate, but 1,500 higher than the last time Charlton came.

ENTERTAINMENT: Plenty to enjoy for Town supporters, and we would settle for this standard every week if it brought similar results every time.

GENUINE SKILL IS WINNER ON FAKE TURF

LUTON TOWN made history this week and set their skills before a select audience when they became the first side ever to win league points in a match played on artificial turf.

The grass at Queen's Park Rangers may have been fake, but there was no mistaking the genuine talent that carried the Town to victory at Loftus Road after a shaky start.

It was the Town who finished the game looking like experts on the artificial surface as a half-time deficit was turned into well-deserved victory.

It gave them a maximum of six points from their opening two games and left a lot of the top brass, from Sir Stanley Rouse downwards, looking very happy with the entertainment served up.

Rangers have invested £350,000 in their wall-to-wall plastic carpet. It will be used by rugby and hockey in the next week or two, but on Tuesday night it was the Town's football that did most to suggest that this is the sort of ground development bound to gather pace if clubs are prepared to gamble on having the ability to use it.

Teams short on quality players have a vested interest in opposing such progress. As Rangers boss Terry Venables said, the surface is like a snooker table. Passes need to be hit with greater accuracy than on grass, and lack of control skill is highlighted.

There are no bumps or bobbles to excuse poor shots or misplaced passes, and if the game is in danger of being too clinical on Omniturf, I suspect that defenders will face problems in trying to turn when the surface is wet.

I went to Rangers unwilling to believe that the traditional British pitch, with its variety of conditions through a season,

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should be thrown overboard. I am not so positive in my view now.

But I am sure that the style of play will slowly change if the idea catches on. Sliding tackles were unseen on Tuesday night, and whatever the pros and cons of Omniturf the Town won because of greater skill, determination and old-fashioned football sense.

It took them a long time to settle down, and with players slipping and sliding on pimple-soled flat shoes, Rangers looked much more in command for the first half.

Kirk Stephens struggled more than most, and his flank came under regular attack through the hard running of Simon Stainrod.

A left-wing raid brought the first goal. The ball was knocked deep from left to right, lobbed back by defender Bob Hazell, and headed into the net at the far post by Andy King.

The Town played Raddy

Antic at sweeper but Ricky Hill and Brian Horton were overworked as they were asked to do too much in midfield. Godfrey Ingram's best work down the left flank was in covering back, which left Brian Stein and Steve White outnumbered when the Town tried to get forward.

At half-time I feared we were in for a thrashing, but in the second half Mark Aizlewood was pushed further forward and turned in a sparkling performance. He made the Town's left flank much more potent, and Stein and Hill gave a striking balance down the right.

The change in tactics fooled Rangers completely, although Findlay had to make a vital diving save to keep out a header by Allen in the 62nd minute. The effort was worth a goal against a lesser keeper, but the save turned out to be the springboard for success.

The Town started to put together moves involving short accurate passes, and several one-touch combinations were positively dazzling.

Every man in the team seemed to grow in confidence as the minutes ticked by and after the Town's pressure had put

Tuesday's Details

QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS 1, LUTON TOWN 2
Half-time: 1-0

TOWN: Findlay, Stephens, Saxby, Donaghy, Aizlewood, Antic, Horton, Hill, Stein, White, Ingram. Sub: Small, not needed.

RANGERS: Burridge, Gregory, Hazell, Roeder, Fenwick, Waddock, Francis, King, Flanagan, Stainrod, Allen. Sub: Micklewhite, not used.

THE GOALS: Andy King header for Rangers 34 minutes; Mark Aizlewood equaliser from Ricky Hill's pass, 70 minutes; Ricky Hill, cracking winner with shot from edge of the box, 84 minutes.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town nine saved and eight wide; Rangers seven saved and nine off target. Corners: 8-8.

REFEREE: Alan Robinson, Portsmouth.

ATTENDANCE: 18,203—although Rangers had hoped for a capacity of 27,000.

ENTERTAINMENT: Top quality, particularly in the second half when the Town got used to the Omniturf. Pity they haven't got it at places like Grimsby, Oldham and Watford.

them on top the goal they deserved arrived in the 70th minute.

The Town were waiting to bring on Mick Small in place of Ingram when another attack was launched from midfield. Hill, much more incisive than he had been against Charlton, carried the ball down the right and lobbed it towards the far side of the penalty area. Goalkeeper John Burridge tried to cut it out, and White and

Aizlewood were both racing him for the first touch. Aizlewood got it, and cleverly lifted the ball over Burridge into the net.

The goal relieved Ingram and after White had forced Burridge to a good double save the night should have been Ingram's in the 81st minute. More brilliant work by Hill put Ingram clear just inside the penalty area, but he took too long to control the ball and was blocked out when he might well have scored.

But three minutes later the disappointment vanished. Glenn Roeder had just missed a chance when Aizlewood beat Gerry Francis in a tackle in midfield. He set White moving forward, and as he was half-tackled on the edge of the box Hill surged forward and cracked the ball almost off White's toe into the net at ferocious pace.

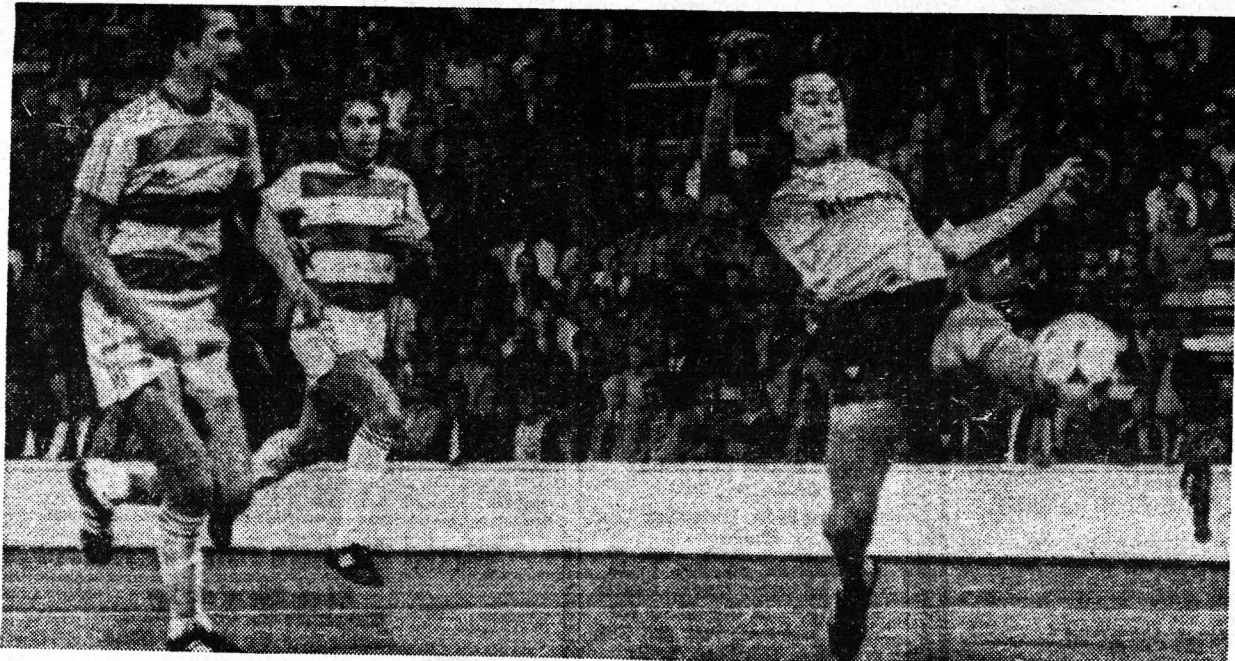
"We can't have any complaints about that result," admitted Rangers boss Venables. "In the second half we didn't seem to have anyone to pass to when we got the ball. Luton attacked us and got what they deserved."

Mr Venables, author of a novel entitled "They Used to Play on Grass", added that he was pleased Luton Town had provided the opposition for a match which everyone wanted to see.

He could hardly have had a better team to demonstrate how entertaining football can be on a synthetic surface.



● WINNER: Ricky Hill is perfectly balanced to strike the goal which completed the Town's second-half recovery at Loftus Road on Tuesday



● EQUALISER: Mark Aizlewood lobs the ball for goal, with Glen Roeder and Gerry Francis powerless

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IS PERFECT OPENING

THE TOWN'S reserves also kicked off with the perfect start in the Football Combination with a London double, beating Orient 4-0 at Brisbane Road on Saturday and Spurs 1-0 at Kenilworth Road on Monday.

Mick Small got a hat-trick at Orient and was rested for the Spurs match to be available as substitute at Loftus Road, and with Frank Bunn out with a hip injury the performance against Spurs was not as smooth.

Football's cruelty was underlined at Kenilworth Road—the Spurs goalkeeper was Milija Aleksic, who ended last season with an FA Cup winner's medal at Wembley, and now finds himself an understudy after the transfer of Ray Clemence from Liverpool to White Hart Lane.

The defensive wall let him down for

the decisive goal. Cahil McConville, still a schoolboy but looking full of promises as a central attacker, was pulled down just outside the area and Lil Fuccillo hammered the free kick through the wall and into the net.

At Orient all the goals came in the second half, with Small outstanding. His first goal was a header from a free kick by Fuccillo, and his second an amazing individual effort leaving coach Trevor Hartley unsure whether to cheer or cry. Small won possession on the by-line, nutmegged one defender, dummied two others by failing to pull the ball back, then beat a tackle on the near post to score from an impossible angle. "It was all wrong in the coaching manual, but a brilliant goal," said Hartley.

Bunn laid on Small's third before Small returned the favour for Bunn to net the fourth.