

ROUGH JUSTICE IS FAIR ENOUGH

ALMOST swept aside by an avalanche of physical power and intimidating aggression, Luton Town can easily stand accused today of giving their worst performance for a long time in the 3-3 draw at Hillsborough against Sheffield Wednesday.

Mistakes in defence cost them three goals, and Wednesday's overwhelming commitment and hard running all but snuffed out the Town's mid-field and attack.

There were only three serious shots at the Wednesday goal in 90 minutes, and each was made to count. You can complain about the lack of goal attempts, but the conversion rate couldn't have been better.

The day's real loser was the game of football. The match was spattered with crude fouls, five bookings, a sending-off and a referee who was unable to cope with the immense problems posed when players are determined to break the rules.

He made some strange decisions. A couple of bookings did not look justified, yet some tackles which were well out of order earned no more than a word of warning.

TOO FAR

The Town's normal football flair and invention never had a chance to flourish. Wednesday might claim that soccer is a man's game, with physical contact all part of it. But they took the concept too far. They were willing to give blood and sweat, run through players as well as at them, and trust that a high-speed cup-tie approach would bring results.

They very nearly succeeded, and sadly their crowd seemed to enjoy the prospect. They even fought in the main stand, and when one customer got on to the pitch to try to retaliate on David Moss for a foul some of the goons cheered him.

The Town are not built to combat fire with fire, and when Wednesday went into the lead for the first time with eight minutes to go there seemed no chance that the Town could save their proud record of only one defeat in 16 league matches.

But even if they had played below their normal standard it was a delight to see them refuse to give up. The injury-time equaliser by Brian Stein might have been rough justice on Wednesday, but it was the sort of defiance we would not have seen in a similar situation two or three years ago.

I suspect most teams would fold up against the physical assault Wednesday launched. But I hope that for the good of the game they don't.

Sheffield's intentions were made clear early on, when Mel Sterland was booked for a late tackle on Moss after the winger had got past him in the eighth minute. By the 21st minute Gary Megson's name was also in the book, for a foul on Lil Fuccillo. I thought it was a harsh decision,

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and it was to prove crucial later on—Megson well deserved a caution for his 88th-minute foul on Brian Horton, which earned him a sending-off and raised the crowd to new heights of fury.

I wonder if human nature made referee Lovatt feel that Wednesday were the aggressors and should not prosper. Kirk Stephens, who did a lot of good things and some appalling ones, ought to have been sent off in the 32nd minute. He stamped on the fallen figure of Paul Shirtliff in retaliation after the Town had been given a free kick for a foul. Within a minute Mark Aizlewood fouled Gary Bannister and should have been booked, but wasn't.

INCENSED

Those two incidents incensed the Wednesday team and their supporters, and the ref's failure to punish them may have been an excuse for players to go over the top.

Mr Lovatt tried to get back in charge with a booking for Clive Goodyear, scarcely deserved, and later one for Charlie Williamson which was another I disagreed with.

Raddy Antic, on as sub for the battered Moss after 70 minutes, earned his booking for fouling Megson a minute before the Wednesday midfielder was sent off for scything down Horton.

Between times, Moss had been lucky to escape for a foul on Sterland. A supporter who tried to exact revenge was steered away from his quarry by Megson and handed over to police.

There were just two high spots before the interval, the first a cracking goal by Steve White. Moss rifled a superb long ball forward between two defenders and White raced through to score his 16th goal of the season as goalkeeper Bob Bolder left his advance too late.

That was in the 11th minute, but in the 25th, with Wednesday fighting like tigers for everything and the crowd baying for ever more effort, John Pearson snapped the equaliser.

Stephens, trying a cheeky back pass after one had succeeded earlier, gave the ball to Gary Bannister and luckless Alan Judge was left stranded as the pass lined up a gift goal for Pearson.

The Town's defence had

Match Details

SHEFFIELD WED 3, LUTON TOWN 3

Half-time: 1-1

TOWN: Judge, Stephens, Goodyear, Donaghy, Aizlewood; Hill, Horton, Fuccillo; Stein, White, Moss (Antic, 70 mins).

WEDNESDAY: Bolder; Sterland, Peter Shirtliff, Pickering, Williamson; Smith, Megson, Paul Shirtliff, Mellor (Owen, 70 mins); Pearson, Bannister.

THE GOALS: Steve White, 11 minutes, quick off the mark to fasten on to a brilliant through-pass by David Moss; John Pearson for Wednesday, 25 mins, after back pass mistake by Kirk Stephens; Moss, penalty, 49 minutes, after Mel Sterland was adjudged to have tripped him; Pearson for Wednesday, 75 minutes, after Alan Judge went for a long cross a split second too late and missed it; Gary Bannister for Wednesday, 82 minutes, after Stephens missed a clearance; Brian Stein, two minutes into injury time, cracking drive from half-chance made by Mal Donaghy's pass.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town two blocked and one wide; Wednesday three saved and four off target. Corners: 5-1 to Wednesday.

BOOKINGS: Mel Sterland, Gary Megson and Charlie Williamson of Wednesday, Clive Goodyear and Raddy Antic of the Town, all for fouls.

SENT OFF: Megson for his second bookable offence, a terrible foul on Brian Horton in the 88th minute.

REFEREE: John Lovatt, Crewe. Had a very poor game, but if he was not in control the fouls and niggles are down to players, not the ref. The Town shouldn't complain too loudly—he gave them a penalty which was highly dubious, and Kirk Stephens should have been sent off in the first half for stamping on Paul Shirtliff. He didn't even get a booking for that one.

ATTENDANCE: 18,012—Wednesday's best since October, when they were in the top three, and nearly 5,000 higher than for their last home match.

ENTERTAINMENT: Dreadful if you believe football should be a game of skill, talent and artistry. Wednesday relied instead on physical power, intimidation and reckless aggression. Their supporters seemed to enjoy it and the atmosphere of simmering violence ran through the stand as well. The tragedy for football was that Wednesday's approach so very nearly gave them victory.

to be gritty and stubborn, but showed little confidence in Judge and thus did the home side a psychological favour.

With the game always simmering just below the level of dangerous violence, Mr Lovatt stoked up more trouble for himself with a controversial penalty award in the 48th minute.

A weak punch by Bolder put Moss in possession on the Town's left. Sterland was blocking his path to goal and Moss made for the goal-line, a yard inside the penalty area.

Almost on the line, Moss fell over and the ball went out of play. The linesman, on that side and with a very clear view, gave a goal kick, but the ref decided that Sterland had tripped the winger.

Sterland claimed it was all a con-trick, and it took a minute for the protests and consultations to die down. The ref and linesman disagreed, but the ref's decision was final and Moss somehow kept calm throughout the confusion and then scored from the spot.

Wednesday's response was to battle and fight harder than ever, urged on by a crowd that exuded aggression almost to the point of hatred.

Judge had to make a smart save from Pearson, and Bannister shot wide from a good far post chance, but the growing pressure brought Pearson's second goal in the 75th minute.

Mike Pickering's lofted long ball from the right induced Judge to race out of goal to try to make a catch. He missed and Pearson accepted his second gift of the day.

Seven minutes later, with the ground a cauldron of noise, the third error in a defence which had otherwise done so well saw Wednesday go ahead. Stephens had a chance to hack the ball clear from Megson's pass across the box but missed his kick and Bannister scored with a low drive.

PRECISION

Wednesday thought they had done their job. So did I. They started to use up time and paid the penalty. Megson's sending-off robbed them of their best player, and with the watch ticking into the 92nd minute Mal Donaghy forced his way forward and delivered a pass which gave Stein half a chance.

He used it brilliantly, veering away from his marker to make space for a precise low shot into the net from near the edge of the box.

It left Jack Charlton seething with the belief that his side had been robbed. Town boss David Pleat was perplexed and unhappy at the way his side had been so near to defeat.

But there weren't many complaints from the supporters who had made the trip from Luton—and that includes me.