

A LITTLE soccer justice was done at Ninian Park on Monday as the Town completed their championship season with a victory which was far more emphatic than the 3-2 score-line suggests.

81/82

Sweet revenge for the Town against one of only four league teams to beat them in the league this season sent Cardiff tumbling into the Third Division after seven years teetering on the brink.

And it was a well-deserved ambition achieved for David Pleat, who had failed to see a Luton victory on each of his previous visits as manager to the Welsh capital.

In the end I could feel a little sympathy for Cardiff. They're not much of a side, yet they found the spirit to fight back when their cause was lost, scoring twice in the last seven minutes.

My memory of the farewell to Cardiff will be of the hour I spent after the game in their supporters' club. Grown men, as well as women and youngsters, were weeping.

They had plenty to cry about, and were remembering the missed chances that cost their team so dear. They talked about two headers by Gary Stevens which clipped the top of Jake Findlay's bar in the second half, and of a vital early save the goalkeeper made when Mal Donaghy missed a clearance and left Dave Bennett in the clear.

And perhaps they should also weep over two crucial areas in which the Town showed their superiority: in tactical planning and in the brilliance of Brian Stein.

Cardiff played with frantic desperation, but were over-eager when they had sight of goal. Their nerves showed, and the Town, building on steady defence, gradually asserted control.

Raddy Antic was brought back at the expense of Lil Fuccillo, and he and Ricky Hill joined Brian Horton in a midfield which defended well when it had to, and set up some stunning breaks to launch counter-attacks.

If Mr Pleat's planning

Report by Brian Swain Pictures : Mark Richards

and preparations were exactly right, Cardiff boss Len Ashurst made his biggest mistake before kick-off.

He chose to play four men in midfield and only two in attack, and did not put that right until the 55th minute when striker Peter Kitchen went on as sub to replace a midfielder.

The clash of styles produced a fascinating contest, and the final score could well have been something like 7-4 to the Town.

Stein was every inch a First Division player, prepared to work in defence when the pressure was on, and devastating with his finishing as he scored the Town's first and third goals to take his tally to 21 and become the club's leading scorer for the second consecutive year.

Yet he missed two other clear chances, shooting wide from an opening made by David Moss and then hitting the bar from three yards when goalkeeper Ron Healey was hopelessly out of position.

Antic and Steve White laid on Stein's opener in the 22nd minute. Donaghy ghosted upfield to head the Town's second in the 72nd minute from a Moss free kick, and eight minutes later Stein turned two defenders inside out before making it 3-0.

Cardiff's biggest league

gate of the season was in two camps at this stage—half heading out of the ground looking as though they were contemplating a plunge into the River Taff and the other half desperately trying to persuade their fading heroes that miracles could still be achieved.

They very nearly were. Veteran Kitchen, trying to make an impression after being given a free transfer earlier in the day, pulled one back in the 83rd minute and then gave Tarki Micallef an opening to make it 3-2 with three minutes to go.

But at that stage it was of little importance. The Town's First Division class had already made its presence felt.

DETAILS

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens Goodyear, Donaghy, Money; Hill, Antic, Horton; Stein, White, Moss (Small, 80 mins.).

CARDIFF: Healey; Jones, Pontin, Mullen, Henderson; Micallef, Grapes (Kitchen, 55 mins), Gary Bennett, Gilbert; Stevens, Dave Bennett.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein, 22 and 81 minutes, Mal Donaghy 72 minutes; Peter Kitchen 83 minutes and Tarki Micallef 87 minutes for Cardiff.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town nine saved, six wide, one hit the bar. Cardiff five saved, nine wide, two hit the bar. Corners: 12-4 to Cardiff.

ATTENDANCE: 10,277, Cardiff's best league gate of the season.

REFEREE: Alan Robinson, Waterlooville.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good to watch for the Town's loyal following, but agony for the home fans.