

Bad start but good finish

LUTON TOWN 2, ARSENAL 2
AFTER giving the Arsenal an hour's start the Town rekindled their confidence and spirit at a vital time to earn a point in a thrilling game. But their fourth consecutive defeat looked likely for a long time.

With two away matches to come in the First Division, even one point will look like failure if things are still tight in six months time. But the way it was earned showed that even one of the best defences in the country can be beaten when the Town click.

The mystery was how the same team could be so bad in the first half and so good in the second. Manager Peter Pleat thought the wind had something to do with it, gusting behind Arsenal before the interval and then assisting the Town after the break.

But not even a gale would have been fair excuse for the Town's first-half shambles of a performance. Nothing they tried went right, and as Arsenal dominated proceedings Jake Findlay's defiance was all that kept the Town level.

He made three important saves, saw an angled shot by Bryan Talbot hit the outside of the post, and was let off the hook by inaccurate shooting by Graham Rix and Alan Sunderland.

The disjointed Town produced two counter-attacks that might have succeeded, but Paul Walsh could not get solid contact to a low cross by Ricky Hill and David Moss was foiled by a double save when Walsh's through-pass put him clear.

At half-time, knowing their professional pride was near to ruin, the town's players didn't need much of a pep talk from the manager.

A major problem was down the

Town's left side, where Arsenal boss Terry Neill had instructed Rix and Tony Woodcock to pressurise Wayne Turner. Lil Fuccillo, recalled in preference to Billy Kellock in midfield, had to be more concerned with defence than attack and in the end all Arsenal's tactical planning failed to give them a win that they seemed to have earned inside the first hour.

Rix curled in the opening goal in the 53rd minute, when he was left unmarked at the angle of the penalty area to meet a pulled-back corner by Talbot. Two minutes later Rix fed Sunderland who beat Turner and crossed hard and low into the penalty area. Talbot raced through and just beat Clive Goodyear to the ball to score the second.

Goodyear, improving every week, is entitled to ask why he was not given more help at that moment to deal with a scorer coming through from midfield.

Ironically Arsenal's own inexperienced full-back, Danny O'Shea, playing only his second game in the First Division, was the unfortunate culprit twice when the Town finally clicked into gear.

He gave the ball away with a poor clearance to Brian Horton, and the Town skipper knocked off a quick pass at an angle to send Moss running clear on the left wing. His angled chip was a delight — George Wood had come off his line to try to narrow the angle and the ball sailed over him into the top corner.

At last Arsenal were more than matched by a Town team that realised they could play a bit. Horton drove forward relentlessly and more variety appeared in midfield when Raddy Antie went on in place of Turner, and Fuc-

cillo dropped back.

The Yugoslav's first touch was a swerving free kick which was deflected narrowly wide by the defensive wall, but Arsenal's relief was brief.

In the 68th minute the luckless O'Shea, worried by Moss's threat, hung back a yard too much as Hill picked up a clearance in midfield and gave the ball to Horton.

The skipper produced another incisive pass. This time Walsh was picked out in a gap down the middle of the Arsenal defence. O'Shea, out wide, wrecked the offside trap and the Town striker took the ball on his chest, stepped a yard clear of David O'Leary and smashed a thumping shot into the net.

For entertainment, it was a treat for supporters, and the team deserved the ovation they received as they went off. It had been a fascinating contest, much of it played at high speed and with much determination.

Saturday's draw turned out to be two points dropped rather than one gained — the Town slipped back one place in the league table as a result, to 17th, two points above third from bottom. And that crucial third from bottom place is held by Sunderland, this week's opposition.

FACTS AND FIGURES

TOWN: Findlay; Donaghy, Goodyear, Money, Turner (Antie, 63 mins); Hill, Horton, Fuccillo; Stein, Walsh, Moss.

ARSENAL: Wood; O'Shea, O'Leary, Whyte, Sansom; Talbot, Woodcock, Davis, Rix; Sunderland, Robson, Sub: Chapman, not used.

GOALS: Rix and Talbot for Arsenal, 53 and 55 mins. Moss and Walsh for the Town, 63 and 68 mins. Other strikes at goal: Town eight saved, eight wider; Arsenal six saved, six wide, one hit the post. Corners: 6-2 to Arsenal first half and 5-3 to the Town in the second, many of them wind-assisted.

REERIE: Eric Read, Bristol.
ATTENDANCE: 16,597, second highest of the season. Was there really room for nearly 6,000 more?

ENTERTAINMENT: Marvellous second half when the Town finally started playing after giving Arsenal a two-goal start.