

County are taught a lesson in taking chances

NOTTS COUNTY 0, LUTON TOWN 3
HAVING survived until half-time with a little luck, and a lot of skill from goalkeeper Les Sealey, the Town eventually looked worthy winners at Meadow Lane on Boxing Day.

Notts County boss Jimmy Sirrell complained: "We never deserved to lose. Luton's first attack of the game got them a corner and they scored from that.

"Their second goal started with a free-kick to us at their end, and for the third we were pushing forward all over the place."

County were made to look real relegation prospects, and for all Sirrell's moaning, football was done a favour by the Town's win, even though they didn't hit the peaks of performance.

Sirrell's philosophy, explained honestly enough after the game, isn't concerned with attacking to win. "You don't win the league by scoring goals . . . you win by not losing games. Defence is all part of football. If you win every game 1-0 you'll win the title, and fill the ground every week."

Unluckily for him his players were not good enough to put County's plans into operation. They played five men in defence, rarely contested possession in midfield, but used pace and power on the break.

The policy paid dividends in their previous two home games, with five scored against Aston Villa and six against Sunderland.

It failed against the Town because although the Notts defence was compact enough for the first 70 minutes, their attack missed chances. They might have led by 4-1 at half-time, with their direct counter-attacking looking very dangerous. But Sealey made tremendous saves from Nigel Worthington and Martin O'Neill, placed himself perfectly to collect a header by Justin Fashanu, and was saved by

clearances off the line by Brian Horton, Mal Donoghy and Ray Daniel.

Between those alarms the Town had sneaked ahead in the 18th minute, through a powerful header by Trevor Aylott from Brian Stein's corner.

In the second half Ricky Hill got further forward to cut off the forward runs by defender Worthington, and County simply lost their way.

They didn't have the guile to open up a Town defence that got better every minute.

Ironically County had ten men in the opposing half for the only time in the match when the Town made it 2-0 in the 71st minute. A free-kick was blocked by Brian Horton on the edge of his penalty area, and the counter-attack was a perfect lesson for the home side.

Aylott and Hill worked the ball quickly down the left flank, and from Hill's cross a dummy by Paul Walsh gave Daniel an easy close-range goal.

Five minutes later Horton floated a perfect diagonal ball over right-back Goodwin, Mitchell Thomas steamed forward to take the pass in his stride and Aylott was in place to stab in the low cross for the third goal.

MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Sealey; Stephens, Elliott, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Horton, Daniel, Stein, Aylott, Walsh. Sub: Antic, not needed.

COUNTY: McDonagh; Goodwin, Richards, Hunt, Kilcline, Worthington; O'Neill, Christie; Chiedozie, Fashanu, McCulloch (Harkouk, 76 mins).

THE GOALS: Trevor Aylott two, 18 and 76 mins; Ray Daniel, 71 mins. Other strikes: Town three saved, eight wide; County nine saved and ten off target. Corners 10-2 to County.

REFEREE: Trelford Mills, Barnsley. Very fussy, but impartial.

ATTENDANCE: 9,789, County's third best of the season, but with an 11.30 am kick-off only about 500 Town supporters were there.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not exactly festive, but lovely for Town eyes to see a team resilient in defence and sharp on the break.

BOOKINGS: Trevor Christie of County and Paul Walsh and Paul Elliott of the Town, all for fouls which hardly looked vicious.