

ORING

Verdict on the Town's holiday ★

FOREST STEAL AWAY WITH THE POINTS

PLAYING far better than they had done at Sunderland, the Town's second holiday fixture brought an even bigger disappointment at Kenilworth Road on Monday.

Nottingham Forest pinched the points to leave the Town's Christmas and New Year efforts looking well short of the European dream — three points out of 12.

Word from the Town dressing rooms — manager David Pleat for once declined to speak to the Press after the game — was that Forest had been lucky to win, and hadn't deserved to complete their double.

It was a case with some merit, particularly in view of the fluke goal which gave Forest their equaliser.

Against that, it wasn't luck that enabled Forest to keep the deficit down to one goal when the Town were on top for the first half hour. It was a mixture of dogged defending and the Town's inability to turn pressure into clear scoring chances.

BRIGHT DEBUT

One bright feature shone through the gloom — the performance of 24-year-old Nigerian Emeka Nwajobi, who made a surprise debut, laid on one goal and scored the second.

After just three reserve team games and two goals he was thrown into his first taste of league football because Trevor Aylott was still injured.

Once he settled to the pace of the game he showed a welcome calmness and control, and he took his goal beautifully.

But on a gluepot pitch the Town's style had little chance of success. Forest were in danger of being overrun, got stuck in, attacked with more directness, and made the most of it when things broke their way.

Referee David Axcell, from Southend, helped neither side with some very odd decisions, and Forest's physical approach was allowed to flourish more than it should.

Kirk Stephens and Mitchell Thomas returned to the side

LUTON TOWN 2
NOTTINGHAM FOREST 3
(Half-time 1-3)

after missing the Sunderland game but a late rash of mistakes spoiled the Town's second-half attempts to save the game after being 1-3 down at the interval.

Forest ought to have been cut down to size in the first 30 minutes. The Town streamed on to attack with no regard to the windswept conditions and fully deserved the goal Paul Walsh stroked into the far corner off the inside of a post in the ninth minute.

Brian Horton started the move from his own half. He stopped a Forest attack before breaking forward at speed and passing to Nwajobi. His through-ball on to Walsh was perfectly weighted and placed, and Walsh turned Kenny Swain and scored from the edge of the box.

A succession of free kicks, many for debatable offences, interrupted the flow of the game, and one led to Forest's revival starting in the 37th minute.

Les Sealey had no chance with the first of three goals that whizzed past him in six minutes. Garry Birtles slammed a 35-yard free kick goalwards, and a deflection off Steve Hodge left Sealey well out of position as the ball hit the net.

Two minutes later Steve Wigley's short pass cut out Thomas's challenge and Hodge cracked in the second, and the Town's bright start counted for nothing when Peter Davenport scored Forest's third, with a flicked

deflection from Wigley's low shot.

Few teams can expect to put three goals past a Brian Clough side in 45 minutes, but the Town tried hard enough in the second half.

Brian Stein pushed a shot wide from Horton's through ball and Paul Elliott had a drive blocked in a crowded goalmouth as the Town sought the early boost they needed.

But 63 minutes had ticked by before Nwajobi delighted everyone with a debut goal from the inside right position. He snapped off a shot from the edge of the penalty area after Walsh helped him find the yard of space he needed to strike.

But Forest worked hard to blunt the threat from midfield, and the 80th-minute introduction of Raddy Antic in place of Frank Bunn made no real impact.

DETAILS

TOWN: Sealey; Stephens, Elliott, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Horton, Bunn (Antic, 80 mins); Stein, Walsh, Nwajobi.

FOREST: Van Breukelen; Anderson, Hart, Fairclough, Swain; Wigley, Hodge, Bowyer, Walsh; Birtles, Davenport (Wallace, 76 mins).

THE GOALS: Walsh for the Town, 9 minutes; Birtles for Forest, 37 mins; Hodge for Forest, 38 mins; Davenport for Forest, 43 mins; Nwajobi for the Town, 63 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town nine saved and three off target; Forest five saved and one wide. Corners: 12-6 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 12,126.
REFEREE: David Axcell, Southend.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not bad, but the score-line wrecked it for Town fans.



● ARM IN ARM: Forest skipper Ian Bowyer in close contact with Brian Stein.



● FOILED: Brian Stein is thwarted by Hans van Breukelen.

Three defeats cause a slide

THIRD in the First Division after their win at Notts County on Boxing Day, the Town have dropped down to ninth after three consecutive defeats.

The visit to Sunderland completed the first half of the season, and defeat left the Town in sixth place.

THE TABLE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Liverpool	22	13	6	3	37	17	45
Man Utd	22	12	6	4	40	24	42
West Ham	22	12	4	6	37	21	40
Nottm For	22	12	3	7	41	25	39
Southampton	22	11	6	5	26	18	39
Coventry	22	10	7	5	31	25	37
Aston Villa	22	10	6	6	35	32	36
QPR	22	11	2	9	33	21	35
Luton	22	11	2	9	38	33	35
Norwich	22	8	7	7	27	26	32
Arsenal	22	8	3	10	38	32	30
Tottenham	22	8	4	8	35	30	30
Sunderland	22	8	6	8	25	29	30
Ipswich	22	8	5	9	32	29	29
WBA	22	8	3	11	25	34	27
Everton	22	7	6	9	13	23	27
Watford	22	7	4	11	36	40	25
Leicester	22	6	7	10	32	40	25
Birmingham	22	5	4	13	17	25	19
Notts C	22	5	4	13	29	42	19
Stoke	21	3	7	11	20	35	16
Wolves	22	3	5	14	19	50	14

No team took the maximum 12 points from the Christmas and New Year games, but Liverpool stayed three points clear of the pack despite being held to a 1-1 draw at Anfield on Monday by second-placed Manchester United.

Watford's revival continued; they and Nottingham Forest were the division's most successful holiday clubs, taking nine points from four games.

Their 3-2 win at White Hart Lane on Monday just about finished Spurs' hopes of challenging for the championship.