

TACTICAL CHOICE A MISTAKE

THE manager included himself in the Luton Town team of 13 beaten at The Dell by a Southampton side which now has European football and an FA Cup final appearance firmly in its sights.

David Pleat confessed that his team selection ability, lauded when it held champions Liverpool at Kenilworth Road, was one of the Luton failures this time.

A late goal by Mal Donaghy, his first in the league this season, induced a brief spell of hope that the Town might snatch a point they did not deserve on their performance for the first 90 minutes.

Referee Keith Cooper played an astonishing extra five minutes for no obvious reason, and it was the only period when Southampton were not in full control of things.

One victory at Wolverhampton has been the Town's only win in their last 11 league and cup outings, and with chairman Denis Mortimer in the stand it may not have been a bad day to point up the clash of interests bedevilling Mr Pleat.

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

Money has been found to finance various non-football "experts" in connection with the Milton Keynes dream. The manager needs cash for players. Just one more quality First Division midfielder might have made all the difference at The Dell.

Eight players in the two teams were seeking to impress England boss Bobby Robson, who was watching his last game before picking sides to meet France on Tuesday and last night at under-21 and full international levels.

The Southampton hopefuls did most to further their ambitions, and I made their skipper, Steve Williams, the man of the match for a storming second half effort when the Town were close to being humiliated.

Mr Pleat had thought about bringing back Trevor Aylott, but decided instead that Emeka Nwajiobi should be recalled to play on the flank. The idea was that he might put pressure on Mark Dennis, and stop his breaks upfield, and at the same time Paul Walsh and Brian Stein would be back in their twin spearhead roles to end a three-match famine and to show their international potential.

Both objectives were missed. Nwajiobi hardly looked like a winger, but might just become a very good centre-forward.

Walsh and Stein both tried hard to wriggle through to dangerous positions, but were foiled by a Southampton defence which operates a smooth sweeper system, with Reuben

Agboola the spare man to tidy up if and when the considerable defensive skills of Mark Wright and Mick Mills were by-passed.

At half-time Southampton were flattered by their two-goal lead. By the end, the Town were flattered by the result.

The Saints gradually won the midfield contest, and Stein and Walsh were denied the sort of service they might expect in an England team.

The defence suffered under growing pressure, and while at times the stopping work was good, failure to pass accurately resulted in Southampton having so much possession of the ball that they could afford to miss a stack of chances.

The ITV film coverage was kind to Luton, making the game look more evenly-balanced than it was. In the first half the Town managed only two shots on target—a "goal" by Nwajiobi that was disallowed and a

drive by Stein which went straight to Peter Shilton.

The first goal brought moans and groans from Town supporters. Mills had overlapped down the flank, and tangled with Mitchell Thomas just outside the penalty area. The linesman saw no foul as Thomas eventually got the ball away, but the referee over-ruled him and gave the Saints a free kick.

With time to get organised, the Town still had no tall man spare to pick up centre-half Wright and he charged in at the far post to meet the flighted free kick by Williams to head his first goal of the season.

Within a minute of that reverse the Town had the ball in the Southampton net.

Stein and Walsh worked a half-chance and Wright made a hash of a back-pass attempt. Stein and Shilton went for the ball together and as neither won it Nwajiobi netted.

Referee Keith Cooper ruled that Stein's challenge on Shilton was a foul. I wondered if he would have made the same decision at the other end, or if any other player bar a goalkeeper had been involved. There are times when 50/50 decisions always seem to go in favour of the big-name player who is an admired professional.

At that stage the Town looked capable of staying in contention, but the defence was caught by another high cross a few seconds before half-time. Sealey punched a cross from Southampton's left flank towards the other wing, Mills sent the ball back into the middle and David Armstrong had all the time and space he needed to take very deliberate aim from seven yards to put his header into the net.

The Town were in danger of being over-run in the second half. Sealey made a

couple of very good saves as Williams drove his side forward, and Frank Worthington cracked a 20-yarder against the bar.

With 24 minutes to go, Mr Pleat changed formation, withdrawing Nwajiobi, sending on Clive Goodyear into central defence and pushing Donaghy into midfield.

It was too late to stem the tide of Southampton confidence, and the Town had an amazing let-off when Steve Moran drew and beat Sealey and laid a pass to Armstrong who shot wide of a near-empty net from about eight yards.

Consolation came with my watch showing 89 minutes and 12 seconds gone. Dennis crunched into Horton to earn a booking. Horton rolled the free kick to Kirk Stephens, and his long cross was headed back by Goodyear for Donaghy to head into the top corner, well out of Shilton's reach.

Euro-dream is fading

AFTER being in contention for a place in Europe at the turn of the year, the Town's 1984 results have sent them tumbling down to a mid-table place in the First Division.

One win at Wolves, and two draws, at Aston Villa and at home to Liverpool, means that they have taken only five points out of the last 27 at stake.

Defeat at Southampton dropped them three places, to 11th, which is the lowest they have been all season.

The top six, where UEFA Cup places are guaranteed, are now nine points above the Town's 40. The nearest relegation place is 11 points below the Town.

Liverpool continue to look like title favourites, with QPR, who come to Kenilworth Road this week, beaten 2-0 at Anfield. Manchester United reclaimed second place because while they were beating Sunderland 2-1 at Old Trafford Nottingham Forest were going down to a

surprise home defeat against Arsenal. Paul Mariner got the only goal, his first since his transfer from Ipswich. West Ham dropped to fourth when they lost at Norwich.

Today's home and away league table:

	HOME Goals					AWAY Goals				
	P	W	D	L	F A	P	W	D	L	F A
Liverpool	29	10	3	2	30 8	7	5	2	17	12 59
Manchester Utd	29	10	2	3	31 15	5	8	1	29	16 55
Nottingham For	29	9	3	3	31 14	7	2	5	23	19 53
West Ham	29	9	2	3	32 15	6	3	6	14	16 50
Southampton	28	9	3	2	20 11	5	4	5	15	13 49
Queens Park Rgrs	28	9	3	3	25 9	5	1	7	20	17 46
Norwich	29	8	4	3	24 14	3	5	6	10	18 42
Watford	29	6	4	4	30 26	8	1	8	26	28 41
Tottenham	29	6	3	5	22 20	5	5	5	24	25 41
Aston Villa	28	10	3	2	26 15	1	5	7	17	27 41
Luton	28	5	3	6	24 24	7	1	6	18	19 40
Coventry	28	5	3	5	19 16	5	6	4	19	21 39
Arsenal	29	5	4	6	22 20	6	1	7	22	20 38
Birmingham	29	6	2	6	15 13	4	4	7	15	21 36
Everton	27	5	5	3	11 8	4	4	6	14	23 36
Sunderland	28	5	6	3	18 12	3	3	8	10	27 33
Ipswich	28	7	2	5	24 17	2	3	9	12	23 32
Leicester	28	6	4	4	23 21	2	4	8	21	28 32
West Brom	29	6	3	5	13 10	3	2	10	14	29 32
Stoke	29	6	3	5	17 18	1	5	9	10	31 29
Notts County	28	3	4	6	22 28	2	2	11	14	30 21
Wolves	28	2	6	7	13 24	2	1	10	9	34 19