

Stoking up the season's first relegation bid

WITH ONE eye on the visit to Ipswich which was then yet to come, Town boss David Pleat threw a little cautious warning into the euphoria that greeted the first-day home victory over Stoke.

We had seen a match to raise spirits of fans and players alike, with the Town so much the better team that the result was positively flattering to the visitors.

"Don't take that one performance as a reflection of how we are going to do this season," warned Mr Pleat.

The unspoken implication, which he was much too polite to put into words, was that Stoke were already involved in their annual fight against relegation. They lost again on Monday, 1-3 at home to Aston Villa.

Having failed to sign a single first team player in the summer Stoke offered little resistance to a Town side in which three new men were determined to cut a dash and most of the rest had to prove a point and earn continued places in the first team squad.

Stoke were so bad that Andy Dibble was given no chance to show his worth after a £150,000 transfer. All he needed for most of the 90 minutes was eyesight good enough to watch the action 100 yards away.

The defence was rarely tested, but when it was it carried too much quality for a weak two-man strike force. The absence through injury of Mark Chamberlain ensured that Ashley Grimes had few problems at left-back.

Stacey North, playing only the second league game of his career, strolled through the game as Paul Elliott's deputy, and like Mal Donaghy and Mitchell Thomas enjoyed the sort of restful afternoon few other teams will allow.

The most positive successes were in mid-field and attack. Ricky Hill was outstanding, back to the surging form that made him an England midfielder, and confident enough again to break through and rattle in shots at goal.

Tim Breacker, chunky, quick and a bundle of energy at both ends, stamped his personality on proceedings, and Frank Bunn capped his usual dogged determined display with the Town's overdue second goal.

The departure of Paul Walsh was no detriment to the attack. Brian Stein sparkled with the confident running we had not seen from him for some time. Steve Elliott did a lovely job in making himself available at any time and place, and David Moss responded to all the good things

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STOKE CITY		0
(Half-time 1-0)		

around by showing that he will give Vince Hilaire a hard fight for the left wing place.

Stoke were left to clutch consolation from claims that they lost because the ref missed a foul when the first goal was scored after only three minutes.

North's long throw-in capability was added to the Town's attacking variety, and from one Elliott and Peter Fox competed for the ball. The goalkeeper dropped it, Elliott scored, and Stoke asked in vain for Tom Bune to call Elliott's challenge a foul.

Fox was under pressure for most of the next 87 minutes, and the only criticism of the Town was that they should have had more goals, and put more of their shots on target.

The clincher came in the 65th minute, with Stein's pace and control taking him past two men, Elliott's run off the ball drawing another away, and Bunn racing in from the back to meet Stein's cut-back pass with a first-time shot that Fox palmed into the far corner of the net.

Between times Stoke had managed to clear off the line from Moss and Elliott. "Maybe we should have moved up a gear and scored more," said Mr Pleat. "But we can't be unhappy with that performance—we deserved to win."

Stoke boss Bill Asprey claimed that his team had enough of the ball in the late stages to have pinched a point. Which left me thinking his judgement matched his team's playing ability — not all that it might be, to say the very least.

MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Dibble; Thomas, North, Donaghy, Grimes; Hill, Breacker, Bunn; Stein, Elliott, Moss. Sub: Turner, not needed.

STOKE: Fox; Bould, Dyson, O'Callaghan, Maskery; James, McIlroy, Hudson, Parkin; Heath, Painter. Sub: Hemming, not used.

THE GOALS: Steve Elliott, 3 mins, with Stoke complaining he had fouled the goalkeeper before bundling the ball in from Stacey North's long throw-in; Frank Bunn, 65 mins, 18-yard drive from superb run and cut-back pass by Brian Stein.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town nine saved and 13 off target; Stoke two saved, four wide, one hit the bar with the flag raised for offside. Corners: 6-4 to the Town.

REFEREE: Tom Bune, Newbury — Stoke moaned about the early goal, but he was in the right place to decide.

ATTENDANCE: 8,626—easily the day's lowest in the First Division, 1,200 down on the last time Stoke came, in May, and Kenilworth Road's lowest first-day gate for five years.

ENTERTAINMENT: Lovely stuff from the Town, although Stoke will probably make a lot of teams look good this season.