

Little left for the manager

84/85

to talk about

WEST BROMWICH ALBION ... 4, LUTON TOWN ... 0

MANAGER DAVID PLEAT earned more respect than his team at The Hawthorns on Saturday. Subdued almost to the point of temporary depression, he surprised pressmen who don't know him by turning up to meet them after the game.

Neutrals and the Birmingham-based reporters figured that the Town's performance had been so awful there was nothing the manager would want to say.

He had to admit that his team was second best in every department, and that they couldn't complain about their worst defeat since Manchester United humiliated them on TV in February.

ATTACKING FULL BACK

The major talking point was West Brom's domination of the Town left flank, with right-back Clive Whitehead showing his old right-wing skills in a pattern that produced all four goals.

Ashley Grimes had a nightmare at left-back, but Mr Pleat insisted that the reasons for defeat went beyond that — "When your front players keep losing the ball others are bound to be caught out — defending is about attacking well."

Albion boss John Giles made a similar point, adding that Luton had contributed handsomely to the afternoon's entertainment by their open approach to the game and a willingness to keep going forward.

The result hinged on two facts: West Brom, by their manager's judgement, had 12 men who nearly all played as well as

they can. The Town had seven or eight who were well below par.

Things might just have been different with a luckier run of the ball in the first couple of minutes: from a free kick by Grimes, Brian Stein flicked a back-header to the far post, and Frank Bunn was an inch or two away from making contact with a lunge that would have opened the scoring.

But there was no other real attacking threat from the Town until the closing minutes. West Brom scored four, hit the bar twice, missed a stack of chances and generally outclassed the Town.

Mitchell Thomas kept Tony Morley quiet on Albion's left wing, but West Brom more than compensated by the ease with which they controlled just about the whole length of the pitch on the other flank.

Whitehead rarely had to bother defending against David Moss, and his constant overlaps were the match-winning difference where it mattered.

Even Mal Donaghy caught the jitters as West Brom took control, with Steve MacKenzie, Steve Hunt and Tony Grealish all able to move up from midfield in support of attacks.

The height, skill and physical power of Garry Thompson and Cyrille Regis in the penalty area became perfect complements to the steady service from the right wing.

Frank Bunn and Tim Breacker were just about swamped, and Ricky Hill was forced to work so hard in defence that his attacking powers were rarely in use.

I found it sad as well to see the Town use what appeared to be an offside trap. Mr Pleat claims that it is an attempt to pressurise opponents, not a deliberate defensive ploy. At West Brom the move failed several times. Not only do you risk being caught by one of your own defenders being slow off the mark, you can also be let down by linesmen.

That happened twice, with Grealish and Nicky Cross failing to score with only Andy Dibble to beat.

Dibble again showed up well, and had no chance with any of the goals as West Brom peppered the target almost at will.

Some of the shooting lost its direction as Albion seemed to realise that the result was a foregone conclusion.

All the goals came from the right wing service. Steve Hunt headed in Whitehead's long diagonal cross in the 24th minute, and

four minutes before the interval Whitehead supplied the centre for Regis to head the second.

Cross replaced Regis for the second half, and his first shot was a 20-yard cracker which hit the bar, with Dibble doing well to block Cross's follow-up attempt.

Thompson hit the bar with a header, and on the hour the Town changed formation to try a win-or-bust gamble. Emeka Nwajiobi went on in place of Breacker and the Town tried to play with four men forward.

But the home side scored twice more before Stein's shot from Nwajiobi's run and pass forced Tony Godden to his hardest save of the match.

Mackenzie broke down the right in the 66th minute, by-passed Grimes with the centre, and Cross scored. Five minutes later when the offside trap did work Donaghy put the free-kick to Mackenzie, and another cross from the right found Thompson to score the fourth.

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Dibble; Thomas, North, Donaghy, Grimes; Hill, Breacker (Nwajiobi, 60 mins), Bunn; Stein, Steve Elliott, Moss.

WEST BROM: Godden; Whitehead, Bennett, Robertson, Statham; MacKenzie, Grealish, Hunt; Thompson, Regis (Cross, 45 mins), Morley.

THE GOALS: All from right-wing crosses: Steve Hunt 24 mins, Cyrille Regis 41 mins, Nicky Cross 66 mins, Garry Thompson 71 mins.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town four saved and four wide; West Brom ten saved, five wide, two hit the bar. Corners: 10-4 to West Brom.

REFEREE: Richard Bridges, Deeside.

ATTENDANCE: 11,720.

ENTERTAINMENT: Lovely stuff, the neutrals said. But painful for the Town's travelling contingent.