

HOMework PAYS OFF IN CLASS

94/85

HISTORY-MAKING victory at Loftus Road was much more than a win Luton Town desperately needed on Saturday—it may have done football a big favour by inducing more doubts among QPR players about their notorious offside trap.

Justice was done when Brian Stein beat it to score a late winner for his first league goal of the season. Rangers goalkeeper Peter Hucker confessed afterwards that opposing teams are now getting through the Rangers defensive system with alarming ease.

Manager Alan Mullery, who inherited the team and its tactics from Terry Venables, put it down to other teams doing improved homework on Rangers, particularly when they visit the Omniturf pitch.

Town boss David Pleat had certainly done his, and the first league away win in 14 attempts since Wolverhampton in January was a triumph for him as well as for the players.

Frank Bunn and Vince Hilaire were left out, with Garry Parker and Steve Elliott recalled, and the mid-field and attack linking turned out to be decisive.

Ricky Hill moved over to the left, Wayne Turner again provided the bite in the centre, and with Brian Stein floating behind Steve Elliott the Rangers square back four had good reason to begin doubting the Venables/Mullery system.

The Town's defence looked by far the better. Paul Elliott was outstanding again, Mal Donaghy is beginning to recover his form, and the full-backs completed a compact unit that put QPR's to shame. It was not just the generally good defending — they pushed forward to support attacks much better than the home side did.

And Ashley Grimes, who had an uncertain start to the season at left-back, played his best game yet for the Town as they kept cool in all departments, suffered a couple of disappointments and still came back to win with two goals in the last 13 minutes.

CANON LEAGUE: QPR 2 LUTON TN 3

The other ingredient in a game which provided excellent value for money was the latest alteration to the plastic pitch. More sand has been spread on it and the bounce of the ball is no longer so dramatic and exasperating.

Rangers players seemed to have more fear of making whole-hearted tackles, and defenders still have problems trying to turn quickly when the ball is knocked past them.

Forwards with pace and timing have a good chance of beating the offside tactic, and even Mr Mullery admitted that his team's defence is struggling more on plastic than in away games.

His real problem this week was that he was up against a team determined to win, and with the right approach and style to do well on that unique surface. Mr Pleat called it a green carpet to encourage skill and technique, and on the day everyone in the Town team had those attributes.

Rangers were lucky to be only one down in the first 20 minutes, in which Steve Elliott scored, David Moss hit a post from a difficult angle, and Stein dribbled through and was halted by a spreading save by Hucker.

The goal came in the 17th minute after Steve Elliott had been stopped on a run for goal by Terry Fenwick's push.

Grimes took the free kick from the left, Rangers half-

cleared to the right, and Mitchell Thomas lofted a thoughtful pass back to the left wing.

Grimes moved forward, delivered a perfect cross, and Steve Elliott headed his second goal of the season from about eight yards.

Andy Dibble had another good game, but was stranded by his own determination to dominate the penalty area when the equaliser was scored nine minutes later.

He went to the edge of the box to meet a cross by Gary Bannister, was under pressure for the punch, and Mike Fillery met the weak clearance first-time to shoot over Donaghy and Paul Elliott into the top of the net from 25 yards.

Both sides were positive in attack and Rangers seemed to be heading for their first plastic win over the Town in the 61st minute when Gary Micklewhite sent Simon Stainrod clear down the right wing for Bannister to touch in Stainrod's low cross-shot.

Several times the offside trap worked as the Town tried to get back, but Turner's angled pass from mid-field to Moss sprang it in the 77th minute. Defenders were still too far upfield as Paul Elliott raced in on the far side to head the cross by Moss into the net.

**Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards**



● **WINNER:** Brian Stein sews it up at Loftus Road

And the week's self-examination of tactics was really sparked off five minutes later when Hill, another Town player recapturing positive form, beat the square defence again.

His pass gave Stein the chance to exploit pace and control. Wicks and Ian Dawes were left half a yard short, Hucker advanced optimistically, and Stein forced the winner past all three.

DETAILS

TOWN: Dibble, Thomas, Paul Elliott, Donaghy, Grimes, Parker, Turner, Hill, Stein, Steve Elliott, Moss. Sub: Hilaire, not used.

RANGERS: Hucker, Neill, Wicks, Fenwick, Dawes, Micklewhite, Fillery, Fereday, Gregory, Bannister, Stainrod. Sub: Stewart, not used.

THE GOALS: Steve Elliott for the Town, 17 mins; Mike Fillery and Gary Bannister for Rangers, 26 and 61 mins; Paul Elliott and Brian Stein for the Town, 77 and 82 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved, seven wide, one hit a post; Rangers six saved, eight wide. Corners: 5-4 to Rangers.

ATTENDANCE: 12,051, lowest of the season at Loftus Road.

REFEREE: Howard King, Glamorgan—excellent.

ENTERTAINMENT: First rate, from both teams, and with the result right.



● **STUNNED:** Paul Elliott banged home the 78th minute equaliser that stunned Rangers.