

Wembley dream costs a high price

THE DISASTER THAT befell Paul Elliott all but wiped out the pleasure of a Milk Cup victory over Leicester at Kenilworth Road on Tuesday night. A place in the last 16 and the impossible dream of Wembley was hardly worth the price the England under-21 international defender paid.

His broken leg will keep him out of the First Division survival battle that now looks inevitable, and explained why manager David Pleat was probably this season's unhappiest cup winner when the medical verdict on Elliott arrived from the Luton and Dunstable Hospital.

But if the Elliott tragedy might be a long-term disaster, he more than most deserved to hear the good news that the Town had recaptured the spirit and determination to win matches.

Leicester might be on a level with the Town in relegation danger, but their enterprise and initiative, allied with confidence after a 5-0 win in their previous game, set a fair test for a much-changed Town team.

Colin Todd was brought in for his debut, playing alongside Elliott, with Mal Donaghy moved to left-back and Wayne Turner taking his tackling power back into midfield. When Elliott was carried off, Todd and Donaghy settled into a reliable central defensive combination after the Todd / Elliott pairing had suffered early nightmares.

Tim Breacker was recalled to replace Mitchell Thomas, and David Moss, dropped for two matches, came back for Vince Hilaire and played like a teenager rather than a veteran in the twilight of his career.

Manager Pleat was well pleased with the way his team responded to two challenges — the danger of being over-run early on, and the need to improvise and settle down quickly after Elliott's departure.

Andy Dibble returned to keep goal, and made some vital saves, and luckless Leicester went home wondering how they could have allowed the Town to turn the tide of the game so dramatically.

"It was a nightmare for the first 20 minutes," admitted Mr Pleat. "But I have to be pleased with the character our players showed — they can't have too much praise for that."

"To get better after starting so badly is a sign of real quality."

The re-shaped defence looked at sea early on, with Leicester threatening to swamp the Town and

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

finish the game in double quick time.

Alan Smith volleyed over the bar from about three yards, Dibble denied Gary Lineker with a one-handed save, then plunged at the same man's feet to prevent another goal, and was saved by an offside flag when Smith netted in the 11th minute.

Leicester's willingness to make a game of it contributed to a pretty good cup-tie, and after 20 minutes of lethargy the Town at last picked up the pace.

Stein had a header saved, then saw a rasping shot turned round the post by Ian Andrews. From the corner Ricky Hill, much more effective than he had been at Sunderland, had a shot hacked off the line by Robert Jones.

Elliott's injury disrupted the flow of the game for a spell as the Town sent on Garry Parker to play in midfield, with Turner going back to full-back and Donaghy moving into the centre alongside Todd.

The old England war-horse shrugged off his early wobbles and cruised through most of the game, tiring towards the end when Leicester mounted a brief revival bid.

Parker took his chance to get involved like a man reprieved from the axe. He put his unhappy day at Roker Park behind him, and added firepower from midfield which ensured the Town had the ascendancy for most of the second half.

Moss imposed himself on Leicester's right flank, and was cheered joyously for a repertoire which included a header in midfield, a cheerful attempt to dive for a penalty, and even a tackle back in defence when Leicester pressed forward late in the game.

Add to that a goal and the making of another, and you have the perfect ex-

planation of how a good pro should react after being given another chance a fortnight after being dropped for the first time in his career.

Three goals in 15 minutes finished Leicester early in the second half. Moss carefully side-footed the first in the 52nd minute after Stein had headed on Turner's diagonal centre. Tommy Williams lobbed the second over his advancing goalkeeper, trying to pass back under pressure from Frank Bunn, and Donaghy headed the third from a near post corner by Moss.

Dibble made a wonderful save to tip a header by Smith on to and round the post and, although Gary Lineker scored from Steve Lynex's pass in the final minute the Town's place in the last 16 was already assured.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 3 LEICESTER CITY 1

TOWN: Dibble; Breacker, Paul Elliott (Parker, 32 mins), Todd, Donaghy; Hill, Turner, Bunn; Stein, Steve Elliott, Moss.

LEICESTER: Andrews; Feeley, Williams, O'Neill, Wilson; MacDonald, Lynex, Ramsey, Jones (Banks, 69 mins); Lineker, Smith.

THE GOALS: David Moss, 52 minutes, side-foot flick from Brian Stein's headed pass; Tommy Williams, own goal, 57 minutes, lobbing his goalkeeper under pressure from Frank Bunn; Mal Donaghy, header from Moss corner, 67 minutes; Gary Lineker for Leicester, low shot, 89 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town eight saved and eight wide; Leicester six saved and nine wide. Corners: 7-7. BLACKSPOT: Paul Elliott carried off after 32 minutes with a broken leg, and likely to be out for the rest of the season.

ATTENDANCE: 8,015. Including a good following from Leicester. Is the boycott biting?

REFEREE: John Martin, Hampshire — not the best in the world, and finicky on bookings — Mal Donaghy for a foul on Steve Lynex, Kevin MacDonald for body-checking Steve Elliott, Paul Elliott for the tackle on Alan Smith that broke Elliott's leg and Garry Parker for obstruction on Steve Lynex.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good cup-tie after the Town survived early nightmares when Leicester might have gone three up, but everything lost its gloss when the hospital verdict on Paul Elliott came through.



● THANKS A LOT: The goal that killed off Leicester on Tuesday hits the net with goalkeeper Ian Andrews feeling a little down and out. His colleague Tommy Williams had produced an amazing lob from the edge of the penalty area in an attempt to clear from Frank Bunn. Steve Elliott was ready to pounce, but had nothing to do but acclaim the self-inflicted wound as the Town went two up.



● HIDDEN: Mal Donaghy goes up behind Brian Stein to head the third goal.



● POWER-PLAY: Brian Stein bursts between two defenders to get in a shot.