

ARSENAL POWER MAKES SURVIVAL TASK HARDER

SATURDAY'S VISIT by Aston Villa has been turned into something of a do-or-die day by Luton Town's latest defeat. Arsenal always looked the team that seemed to expect to win at Highbury, and with only two points gathered from the last 18 the Town's First Division survival promised by new chairman David Evans begins to look a difficult assignment.

They fell victim to an Arsenal side that had something to prove collectively and individually, and manager Don Howe took much of the credit for a couple of brave team changes.

Goalkeeper and long-time North London favourite Pat Jennings was dropped for the first time in a 20-year career, and £750,000 Charlie Nicholas was left out for the first time since his debut against the Town 15 months ago.

The Nicholas decision turned out to be the important one. It turned Arsenal into a team with three genuine attackers, and Ian Allinson, who languished with Colchester for nine years before a free transfer to Highbury, was in no mood to be seen as less effective than Nicholas.

He turned in an inspired performance, and with the Town playing with little conviction or bite, Arsenal were rarely in trouble.

The Town had reshuffled their pack again without being able to find any aces, and even four men in midfield came off second-best to Arsenal's three.

Sadly, one of the failures was Ricky Hill, once much-fancied by Arsenal. Like Nicholas, he has hit a bad patch, and with him and Frank Bunn unable to make much impression Arsenal hardly had to provide genuine championship class to take the points to hold on to third place in the table.

Wayne Turner gave everything as the main

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

sometimes dragged out of position and by-passed as Arsenal made most of the effective running in attack.

Two clean sheets in 21 league and cup games so far tells its own story, but Mal Donaghy and Foster should be able to settle into a solid experienced central partnership and improve the second-worst record in the First Division.

Lee Sealey was recalled for his first appearance of the season after Jake Findlay went down with a shoulder injury, and the goalkeeper was by no means responsible for defeat.

The difference between the Town style of today and that of two years ago is that while the defence still looks dodgy we no longer have the real likelihood that the attack will score enough goals to compensate.

Brian Stein and Steve Elliott, with mixed support and service, rarely looked like discomfiting an Arsenal side that was full of power and determination.

And while Elliott was unlucky with a late header that nearly made it 3-2, Arsenal had already wasted a penalty that should have made it 4-1.

Things might have gone differently if the Town had

more in the first half, with Sealey fumbling a long-range blaster round the post and seeing another rise too high.

Sealey made a brave save at Allinson's feet after Donaghy almost deflected a shot by Mariner into his own net, but Tim Breacker made a crucial mistake in the 61st minute.

Trying to be constructive in defence, and harried by Allinson, he pushed a back-pass towards goal, and Tony Woodcock snapped up the chance to score Arsenal's second. A far post cross by Allinson and a header by Anderson made it 3-0 six minutes later.

The introduction of sub Meka Nwajiobi as a front runner in place of Bunn instilled more life into the Town's attacks, and his positive forward running helped to create two chances.

First he knocked back a cross by Parker and Stein's acrobatic overhead kick reduced the arrears. His second contribution was run down the right-wing to meet Donaghy's incisive pass and deliver a cross which Elliott headed just wide.

But between those two incidents Arsenal had missed the day's clearest chance. Thomas tripped Allinson, but from the penalty by Brian Talbot, Sealey dived to his right to make a very good save.



● OVER IT GOES: Brian Stein is airborne, with his back to goal, as his acrobatics earn the Town their late goal at Highbury, with Tony Adams and Tommy Caton powerless to intervene.

Match Details

ARSENAL 3 LUTON TOWN 1
HALF-TIME: 1-0

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Turner, Bunn (Nwajiobi, 66 mins); Parker; Stein, Elliott.

ARSENAL: Lukic; Anderson, Adams, Caton, Sansom; Talbot, Davis, Robson; Woodcock, Mariner, Allinson. Sub: Meade, not needed.

THE GOALS: Ian Allinson lob 15 yards for Arsenal, 16 mins; Tony Woodcock for Arsenal, gift from Breacker's back pass, 61 mins; Viv Anderson for Arsenal, header from Allinson cross, 67 mins; Brian Stein for the Town, 74 mins, acrobatic bicycle kick after Nwajiobi knocked back cross from Garry Parker.

OTHER STRIKES: Town eight saved and six wide; Arsenal ten saved, including a penalty, and seven wide. Corners: 11-9 to Arsenal.

ATTENDANCE: 26,336, Highbury's lowest league gate of the season.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good enough for the Arsenal fans, who think their team is back on course for the championship after only one win in the previous five games.

REFEREE: David Axcell, Southend. Had a good game with two teams who were content enough to get on with it without much nastiness.

DEBUT DAY: Steve Foster's first game for the Town, and immediately made skipper. Collected a second-half booking for a trip in Stewart Robson, and nearly scored in the first half.

for hopes