



STOKE'S HIT-AND-RUN NEARLY WINS

MANAGER David Pleat was away from Kenilworth Road looking for players as Luton Town came within four minutes of cup-tie humiliation. Stoke City, the only club below the Town in the league table, were denied a smash-and-grab victory by an 86th-minute equaliser by skipper Steve Foster.

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

The Town deserved the draw, but Stoke went home knowing they could easily have won at the first attempt to earn a home tie with Wolves or Huddersfield in the fourth round. The two Second Division clubs will replay at Huddersfield on Monday after a 1-1 draw at Molineux.

Stoke defended doggedly, counter-attacked effectively, and eventually frustrated the Town with a fighting performance that must have been a tonic for absent manager Bill Asprey, who had been ordered complete rest to overcome exhaustion. A difficult frosty pitch helped make the game farcical at times, with both teams struggling to find the right footwear. Some parts

of the surface had a little give in them at kick-off time, but others were bone hard.

The Town left even their best friends bemused by the strange mixture of their performance. Ricky Hill and Brian Stein threatened to tear Stoke apart with some of their approach work. But as the minutes ticked away there seemed to be a growing lack of conviction through the team, and without Les Sealey's efforts Stoke could easily have won.

They eventually made defending look easy, despite having central defender Brendan O'Callaghan carried off on a stretcher with

13 minutes to go, and while it was still 0-0.

He collided heavily with Mick Harford and received severe concussion in a hard landing.

O'Callaghan and Paul Dyson did a marvellous job in helping to protect 17-year-old goalkeeper Stuart Roberts, and despite exerting a lot of pressure the Town rarely troubled the inexperienced apprentice.

Both sides lost possession too easily to make it much of a spectacle, and a sobering thought is that unless Mr Pleat does find new talent the cup-tie looked like a meeting between two teams heading for relegation.

Both teams had players who, for all their effort and genuine endeavour, were a notch below the class needed to make any sort of impact in the First Division.

The Town looked the more capable so far as building up movements was concerned, but basic steadiness in defence and a little luck kept the visitors in the game when they ought to have been swamped.

BEST MOVE

The best move of the game came just before half-time, when the Town were attacking the softer Kenilworth Road end. Tim Breacker, the discovery of the season, combined with Hill and Brian Stein in a flowing passing combination which took the ball from defence to attack, and ended with

Stein shooting just wide from the edge of the box.

Mick Harford and David Moss also went close, and in the second half Dyson hacked a shot by Stein off the line after Stein had wriggled down the right and beaten the goalkeeper with a cross-shot.

Harford was unlucky with a header which hit the top of the bar after more good work by Hill and Stein.

Worse, with the Town always looking to push forward, they were caught square on the break several times. Ian Painter, who scored Stoke's winner late last season—the last time they managed an away win—got clear three times and was foiled by Sealey. The fourth time, in the 78th minute, with the goalkeeper given no cover at all, Painter

found the target with a low drive.

Sammy McIlroy should have done the same, but after Sealey had fallen over the veteran midfielder took too long and Sealey recovered to save his team again.

The Town's midfield, with David Preece cup-tied and replaced by Ray Daniel, rarely looked well balanced, and while McIlroy and Alan Hudson are not the players they used to be, they had the common sense to play the simple ball every time.

Hudson and Painter had been recalled after injury absences because stand-in manager Tony Lacey figured that Hudson's accurate passing and Painter's speed off the mark could open up the Town defence.

He was right, and it was embarrassing for Town as when Mr Lacey and Painter agreed that before the game they would have been content to accept a draw, but on the day they felt disappointed because they hadn't won.

LIFE SAVER

Meka Nwajiobi was put on a few minutes before Stoke scored, and at least fired off a couple of shots close to the target. But it was a mystery why Moss was taken off rather than, say, Daniel, who did not have a happy match. Moss may be getting old, but at least he is always liable to produce a minute or two of something special in attack.

In the end it was a centre-half who became the successful attacker as the Town mounted a do-or-die final effort.

Stein produced a marvellous run, going down the inside left channel and evading four defenders as he did so. Nwajiobi's shot from his cross was blocked, but Foster met the rebound with his left foot to score his second goal in the last five games.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 1 STOKE CITY 1
HALF-TIME: 0-0

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Turner, Daniel; Stein, Harford, Moss (Nwajiobi, 74 minutes).

STOKE: Roberts; Bould, O'Callaghan (Saunders, 77 minutes), Dyson, Maskery; Parkin, McIlroy, Hudson, Chamberlain; Painter, Bertschin.

THE GOALS: Ian Painter on the break for Stoke, 78 minutes; Steve Foster, left foot close range drive for the Town, 86 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved, seven wide, one hit the bar. Stoke four saved, three wide. Corners: 6-3 to the Town.

REFEREE: Darryl Reeves, Uxbridge — got too close to the action at times, and was not helped by a linesman who had difficulty seeing offside.

ATTENDANCE: 7,270, lower than for any First Division game at Kenilworth Road this season, although it was a bitterly cold day and Stoke brought only a couple of hundred.

ENTERTAINMENT: In very short supply on an icy pitch that was too much for both teams. But the Town should have won by a street in view of the pressure they exerted.



● **SUB ATTACKS:** Meka Nwajiobi lets fly from the edge of the penalty area after replacing David Moss.

● **DOUBLE UP:** Steve Foster backs Mick Harford in an aerial duel with Stoke's Brendan O'Callaghan and Paul Dyson.