

CLASSIC FIT FOR A CELEBRATION

ON A DAY destined for happy celebration, league football at Kenilworth Road served up an entertainment feast for the biggest crowd the ground has housed for two years.

With supporters back in good heart following the Milton Keynes decision, their only gripe was that the heart-stopping last six minutes, in which three goals were scored, could have been rendered irrelevant if the town had made their earlier superiority count.

Title contenders Spurs were more than glad to steal a point from a fast-moving encounter in which they were second best by a long way for the first 75 minutes.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 2 SPURS 2

HALF-TIME: 0-0

84/85

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Nicholas, Preece (Daniel, 76 min); Nwajiobi, Harford, Stein.

TOTTENHAM: Clemence; Stevens, Roberts, Perryman, Hughton; Chiedozie (Hazard 63 min), Hoddle, Mabbutt, Galvin; Crooks, Falco.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein, 48 minutes; Mark Falco for Spurs, 84 minutes; Meka Nwajiobi for the Town, 87 minutes; Graham Roberts for Spurs, 89 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved, seven off target, one disallowed for dubious offside, and one hit the bar; Spurs four saved, four wide. Corners: 6-2 to Spurs.

ATTENDANCE: 17,511—the Town's best since Liverpool's visit two years ago. Was it coincidence that news had just leaked out that the Milton Keynes scheme was dead?

REFEREE: Neil Midgley, Salford—had a few problems with a linesman who struggled with the offside rule. Mick Harford hardly looked to be interfering with play when he was given offside as Brian Stein went through and netted in the fourth minute. But Spurs were sure other offside were not given when they should have been.

BOOKING: Glenn Hoddle for a foul on Peter Nicholas, probably caused by frustration at being unable to match Nicholas and Ricky Hill in midfield.

HIGHSPOTS: The old happy atmosphere reappeared as if by magic, and it didn't, after all, sound like a Spurs home game despite their huge following. Nicholas's superb debut performance added to the day's pleasure.

ENTERTAINMENT: A cracking match with a sting in the tail, with the shine slightly blemished by thoughts that the Town should have had the points wrapped up before the hectic last six minutes when Spurs equalised twice.

Their expensive talent was outgunned in midfield, and there was no sign of the gap that divides the teams in the league table.

The failure to complete victory was a blow for Town supporters, but with a feeling that the club is now poised to win back the backing and affection it once rejected, external hope and optimism was the order of the day.

And Spurs manager Peter Shreeves is convinced the team that so nearly slaughtered his title pretenders is too good to deserve relegation.

He called it one of Spurs' least memorable performances. "Luton took the game to us and for a long time we weren't in it. I'm glad we salvaged a point," he said.

Town boss David Pleat took most delight from the general team-work and from a superb performance by Nicholas in midfield.

The new man slotted into a combination which drew the sting out of Spurs for most of the game. Reliable tackling, canny distribution and a dangerous shot were all put on view and Mr Pleat's four recent acquisitions look capable of sustaining a real fight to stave off relegation.

The re-shaped team has benefited twice over from the new strength. Ricky Hill and David Preece were able to take on more positive roles moving forward, and Tim Breacker's confident display against Tony Galvin enhanced his reputation.

Spurs were reduced to operating an offside trap as the Town swept forward in the first half, and a debatable decision by referee Neil Midgley after only four minutes cost the Town a goal which looked legal to

most of the Pressbox observers.

Hill timed his through-ball down the middle perfectly for Stein to outpace Graham Roberts and shoot past Ray Clemence. But Mick Harford was running to Stein's right, and the offside flag was raised against him, even though he did not get involved in the move.

The Town accepted the decision with good grace, and Harford underlined the new variety of options the Town have in attack with consistent winning of balls in the air as Spurs were forced back.

Nicholas almost got the opening goal in the 28th minute after Roberts had cynically body-checked Stein just outside the box. He was lucky to escape without a booking, and Spurs' luck held as the free kick was touched aside for Nicholas to blast a drive which caught a deflection, and perhaps Clemence's fingertips, as it crashed on to the bar and into the Oak Road crowd.

Another chance was wasted when Nicholas set Stein free for a run down the right. He tried to chip Clemence, but put the ball way over the bar, with Harford waiting in frustration, unmarked at the far post.

When the Town's opener finally arrived, three minutes after the interval, Spurs looked as good as finished. Preece started it with a run down the left. His cross eventually went to the right, aided by Steve Foster's header and Chris Hughton's half-clearance. Meka Nwajiobi

slammed the ball back across goal and Stein turned it instantly past Clemence from six yards.

Nwajiobi, unpredictable but undeniably talented, might have made it 2-0 when he jinked past Roberts and Hughton, but hammered his shot narrowly wide of the near post, and the game was an hour old before Spurs produced any real threat at the other end.

John Chiedozie, whose explosive pace and talent was checked by the Town's midfield determination and Mitchell Thomas's persistence, got down the right and crossed for Garth Crooks to deliver a point-blank-range header.

Les Sealey, playing better now than at any time since he arrived 18 months ago, made an important reflex save, and he produced another in the 81st minute to deny Crooks a second time.

Shreeves gambled by taking off Chiedozie and putting on Mike Hazard. It improved his team's midfield workrate and invention, and Roberts was released to make more forward runs.

Ray Daniel replaced Preece, and almost toe-poked a spectacular own goal past Sealey with an attempted clearance from a corner. But the second corner was only half-cleared. Gary Mabbutt drove in a shot from the edge of the penalty area, the ball was deflected off Foster, and Mark Falco hit a first-time equaliser.

That was with six minutes to go, but three minutes later

the Town looked like winners again when Stein went down the right wing and pulled back a pass which Daniel tried to control. The ball ran to Nwajiobi and he smashed an 18-yard drive into the top corner.

It hit the stanchion so hard that Clemence caught it, and cannily rolled out a clearance to a defender in the hope that the ref wouldn't have realised that it was a goal.

Back came Spurs, and with injury time already on the clock a long throw-in by Mabbutt was not cleared and all-action Roberts drilled in a second equaliser through a crowd of players.

It was a disappointment, but not enough to spoil the day's enjoyment for Luton people who had seen their club emerge at long last from the obnoxious shadow of Milton Keynes.