

Sunderland dish out a

late scare

84/85

LUTON TOWN 2, SUNDERLAND 1
WITH CUP ambitions a dream of fleeting glory, First Division survival is still the major priority at Kenilworth Road. And the Town's first league win of 1985 might still turn out to be the most significant result in this month's crowded fixture list.

There was more thoughtful soccer than we saw in the Watford match, but plenty of physical endeavour and effort.

Sunderland made it a game to remember by staging a second-half recovery that might have snatched a point.

With Peter Nicholas commanding midfield and Mick Harford leading big defenders a merry dance, Sunderland were in danger of being swamped as the Town cut them apart in the first half.

Sunderland manager Len Ashurst was furious with his team, and laid into them during the interval. While the Town had clearly put Watford out of their minds, Sunderland seemed to be conserving all their efforts for Monday night's Milk Cup semi-final second leg at Chelsea. They achieved their Wembley place at Stamford Bridge, but Ashurst bitterly regretted his team's slow start against the Town.

"We were a lot better in the second half, but we didn't deserve to win the game," said Ashurst, whose team is close to being sucked into the relegation battle. "And if Luton keep playing like that they won't go down."

A vein of determination ran through the whole Town side in the first 45 minutes, and Sunderland were lucky to be only two down as their sweeper system fell apart against probing passing and running.

With both sides in need of the points some of the action was a little too frantic, and five players — David Preece, Brian Stein and Mal Donaghy of the Town among them — were booked as the battle raged.

The game looked all over within 30 minutes as the Town had the better of all departments. Harford's header from Preece's right wing corner in the 21st minute put the Town ahead, and Ricky Hill, with an overhead kick, scored the second eight minutes later.

Nothing was seen of Sunderland as an attacking force, and even Steve Foster joined the Town's attempts at goal with a couple of efforts which were kept out by a mixture of luck and defiance by the Sunderland rearguard.

Harford, playing against his home town club, was superb on the ground and in the air, and at half-time we were anticipating a lot of enjoyment as the Town prepared to attack the Oak Road end.

But Ashurst had wound up his men anew during the interval, and they looked a much more dangerous outfit after the break.

Nicholas gave Sunderland a lifeline when he failed to spot Gary Bennett lurking on the edge of the box and played an underweight back-pass towards Les Sealey. Bennett scored after Sealey had blocked his first attempt, and with a little more sharpness in the box Sunderland could easily have nicked a point.

But Sealey denied them with good saves from Clive Walker and Colin West, and appeals for a late penalty were rejected after Walker had gone down in a dramatic heap from a challenge by Mitchell Thomas.

The Town also went close in their counter-attacks, and it was a mystery as to who was adjudged offside in the 63rd minute when Meka Nwajiobi netted with a powerful header from a cross by Nicholas.

The mixture of excitement and fear beat through Luton hearts for the whole of the second half, and David Hodgson missed the clearest chance of the game with a far post header which flew wide.

The final whistle to put us all out of our agony was the day's happiest sound.

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Nicholas, Preece; Nwajiobi, Harford, Stein. Sub: Daniel, not needed.

SUNDERLAND: Turner; Venison, Chisholm, Elliott, Agboola, Pickering; Bennett, Berry (West 64 mins); Hodgson, Lemon, Walker.

THE GOALS: Mick Harford header, 21 mins and Ricky Hill bicycle kick, 29 mins; Gary Bennett for Sunderland, 51 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town nine saved, five wide, one netted and disallowed for offside; Sunderland six saved, two wide. Corners: 8-7 to Sunderland.

ATTENDANCE: 8,019, day's lowest in the First Division, and 2,800 down on the gate the last time Sunderland were the visitors. Doesn't Luton want First Division soccer?

REFEREE: Maurice Robinson, Birmingham — did pretty well, particularly in a mid-way period when tackling and retribution threatened to get out of hand.

BOOKINGS: Berry and Agboola of Sunderland; Preece, Stein and Donaghy of the Town. Venison of Sunderland should have been cautioned as well for a revenge tackle on Preece.

ENTERTAINMENT: Rousing staff—almost as good as a winning cup-tie!