

So close to victory in Yorkshire

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY 1, 84/85

LUTON TOWN 1

AFTER looking like relegation candidates for the first 45 minutes, the Town turned on the style in the second half at Hillsborough on Saturday, and were unlucky not to take three points.

Long before the end the home crowd was jeering its own side as Wednesday were outplayed. Wednesday manager Howard Wilkinson agreed that his team had looked poor until a belated late push, but added: "It could be that Luton are a very good team, and didn't let us perform."

The weather also played a part in swaying fortunes. For the first half the Town were facing a howling, blinding blizzard. It backed the Wednesday system of long-ball passes cutting out midfield, even though the home side could not produce the skill to harness the advantage completely.

The Town had to struggle to stay in the game, with Steve Foster and Mal Donaghy in danger of being overworked before again getting together well enough to suggest they may be the best central defensive partnership in the First Division today.

The Town were forced to settle for grim defence, with Wednesday feeling unlucky to be

only one up at half-time. They scored in the sixth minute, when a hopeful punt into the middle by Lee Chapman went to Gary Shelton just outside the box. He tried to control the difficult dropping pass on his chest, failed, but was happy enough to see the ball run loose for Imre Varadi to hammer a tremendous shot past Les Sealey.

Varadi headed against a post in the last minute of the half, while the Town's attempts to counter-attack fell foul of the offside trap as Wednesday pushed forward.

The second half was a vastly different story. The blizzard blew itself out after about 20 minutes, but by then the Town had almost demoralised Wednesday.

Peter Nicholas and David Preece, recalled after missing the previous four games through being cup-tied, really got into the game after the interval. Nicholas's tackling and distribution swung control the Town's way, and while Wednesday managed to snuff out some of Ricky Hill's danger they failed to hold Preece, whose bursts down the left wing caused all

sorts of problems.

Twice the Nicholas pass to the left, and Preece's run and hard crosses finished with the ball in Wednesday's net.

Brian Stein was adjudged offside the first time, but the second, in the 54th minute, gave the Town the goal they deserved. Stein hit the post from Preece's cross, and Mick Harford followed up to stab home the rebound as defenders tried to close in.

The happiest feature of the day was the sight of Stein in his old form, twisting and turning with the ball, and continually opening up the opposing defence with telling passes.

He more than anyone else in the Town side deserved to be a winner. Twice his pace and guile took him bursting through to lay off accurate passes to Meka Nwajiobi. But twice the Nigerian took the shots quickly, and first-timed them wide.

Wednesday repelled the pressure in the last ten minutes, after the blizzard abated, but looked like being breached.

And four minutes from time Nwajiobi

produced a brilliant flicked pass to leave Wednesday's rearguard scattered. Harford saw a gap, took very deliberate aim with a header, and was foiled by a stunning save from Martin Hodge.

A Town victory would not have been undeserved, but manager David Pleat was happy enough to take one point, which was more than Spurs and Arsenal, for instance, could manage on their trips to Hillsborough.

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

WEDNESDAY: Hodge; Shirliff, Smith, Lyons (Morris, 80 mins), Worthington; Blair, Jonsson, Shelton, Marwood; Chapman, Varadi.

THE GOALS: Imre Varadi for Wednesday, 6 minutes; Mick Harford for the Town, 54 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved, three wide, one hit a post and produced a goal, one netted but disallowed; Wednesday three saved, six wide, one hit a post. Corners: 8-3 to Wednesday.

REFEREE: Joe Worrall, Warrington—was given a pretty easy game by two teams content to get on with it.

ATTENDANCE: 18,856 — lowest league gate of the season so far at Hillsborough, but the weather was awful.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very poor first half, but improved dramatically after the interval when the Town looked a team well capable of beating the relegation threat. A blizzard did nothing to help the general flow of the game.

● **HISTORY** was against the Town at Hillsborough — they have now been there 34 times for league matches, and have won only once when Malcolm Macdonald notched a hat-trick in a 5-1 Second Division victory in October 1970.