

STOKING UP A CUP-TIE DREAM

84/85

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

THE best away win since David Pleat became manager of Luton Town edged relegation fears a little into the background as the team enjoyed its last outing before Saturday's big test at Villa Park.

Bottom club Stoke City were the hapless victims of a bank holiday treat for the Town fans who made the journey to the Victoria ground.

The fixture was arranged at short notice when Coventry's Easter programme, at home to the Town and away to Stoke, was knocked out by a flu bug.

The win—the Town's first 4-0 away success since a trip to Notts County in November 1976—pushed the Town out of the bottom three for the first time since Christmas and perhaps Stoke did the Town a cup semi-final favour by making themselves available as a sort of training punch-bag before the big fight.

The home side, with only three wins in their previous 33 league games, were so

awful that the tiny attendance was either drifting away long before the end, or staying to shout abuse at players and directors.

Stoke, smashed 0-5 by Manchester United two days has lost heart, directors say manager Bill Asprey can't have money to rebuild, and the fans are disillusioned.

Fading stars like Alan Hudson, Sammy McIlroy, Mark Chamberlain and Keith Bertschin were simply not good enough to match a weakened Town side looking for its first away win in six months.

Skipper Steve Foster was rested to allow a slight thigh strain to clear up before Saturday's Villa Park trip, and Peter Nicholas stepped in to partner Mal Donaghy.

Wayne Turner returned to midfield, and with the centre of the pitch mudbound the Town made best use of the firmer parts, on the flanks.

The early departure of Ricky Hill, injured during the first half, put a cloud over the Villa Park dreams,

but enabled David Moss to make his first appearance since the cup-tie on the same ground in January and he looked a class better than he had done in a reserve game at Kenilworth Road on Friday.

While former England winger Chamberlain made the mistake of trying to plod through the mud down the middle, the Town got Moss, Brian Stein, and Meka Nwajiobi moving in wide earlier, are broke. The team positions, and Stoke were all but swamped.

SATISFIED

Paul Dyson and Alan Dodd found it impossible to hold Mick Harford in the air or on the ground, and the only complaint Mr Pleat had after the game was that the Town should have been more ruthless and done more to improve their goal difference figure. Even so, four up with more than 20 minutes to go, the Town had more than satisfied their fans.

Stoke hardly had a serious goal attempt, and when they did get close Les Sealey dealt with everything. He even rushed out once to sweep up outside the area and calmly beat an opponent in a quick dribble before clearing.

Everton manager Howard Kendall sat in the stand to watch 80 minutes of the game, and probably learned very little more than he knew before kick-off.

He will be glad that Nicholas and David Preece will be unable to play on Saturday. Both had excellent games, with Preece adept at turning defence into attack.

Hill's thigh injury in the 30th minute, and departure ten minutes later after an unsuccessful attempt to run it off, hardly mattered in terms of destroying Stoke. They never knew who to expect on raids down the wings, and even sub-standard crosses had Dyson and Dodd in trouble.

The first illustration of

that came in the 17th minute. The Town had played some attractive early football, with Siddall doing well to beat out a sharp drive by Stein from the left.

He made a run down the right to collect an astute pass by Harford, who had surged through the middle, and all seemed lost when Stein's attempt to pull the ball back to Harford failed. Dyson collected, tried to pass back to Siddall, failed to make the pass positively and Harford nipped in to poke the ball under the goal-keeper.

Stoke's attacking threats were contained with ease, and with fans jeering some inept approach work the home side gave up 90 seconds into the second half. Moss's corner from the right produced a scramble at the near post, and although Stein was unable to force the ball home Harford's instinct for the half-chance gave him his second goal, and his third double in the last four games.

He might have had four goals. Mitchell Thomas and Moss combined to open up the defence again, with Harford's far post header being blocked by Siddall, and the keeper did well to deal with a 20-yard piledriver from the centre-forward who has now scored one more than Andy Gray, his Everton counterpart.

ENJOYED

Moss could hardly have had a more friendly opposition to enjoy his return to the First Division, and his 64th-minute goal revived memories of the expert craftsman at his best.

Stein, so willing and patient as a provider of chances, sliced open Stoke's right flank with a pass between two defenders inviting Moss to have a go. The 33-year-old legs were too quick for Steve Bould, who is ten years younger, and the angled shot low past Siddall was perfection.

The best pass of the match brought the fourth goal in the 68th minute. Preece delivered it, 30 yards or more from the left side of midfield towards the right

wing. Meka Nwajiobi, who did not seem to relish the conditions too much, enjoyed the opportunity to run at Chris Maskery from outside the box. He drifted past the defender, waited for the exposed Siddall to start to advance, then cracked in his fifth goal of the season.

It was all too easy, with Stoke knowing they have lost a season's hopes, never mind one match at a time. The refreshing thing for Town fans was that even bottom teams can produce shocks, so why shouldn't Luton upset the formbook against top team Everton.

For all their troubles Stoke had not been beaten by four goals at home all season. And they had managed to beat Arsenal and Manchester United on the ground where Luton Town were a mile ahead in class, commitment and confidence.

Match Details

STOKE CITY 0, LUTON TOWN 4

HALF-TIME: 0-1

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Nicholas, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill (Moss, 40 mins), Turner, Preece; Nwajiobi, Stein, Harford.
STOKE: Siddall; Bould, Dodd, Dyson, Maskery; Painter, Hudson, McIlroy, Heath; Bertschin, Chamberlain. Sub: Parkin, spared humiliation . . . was not sent on.

THE GOALS: Mick Harford two, his second double in four games, 17 and 47 mins; David Moss 64 mins; Meka Nwajiobi 68 mins.

OTHER STRIKERS: Stoke five saved and five wide; Town ten saved and four wide. Corners: 5-4 to Stoke.

ATTENDANCE: 6,951, Stoke's second-lowest league gate of the season, on a wet and windy bank holiday afternoon.

REFEREE: Ian Hendrick, Leicester—not brilliant, but didn't need to be.

ENTERTAINMENT: The Town following enjoyed it immensely, but Stoke, bottom and already accepting their relegation fate, were awful. Even their chairman said he was ashamed of their performance. They had lost 0-5 at Old Trafford on Saturday.