

TV SUPER-SHOW BREAKS A BIG-CLUB DUCK

FOR THE first time since he guided the Town into the First Division three years ago, manager David Pleat this week enjoyed the delight of beating one of the top teams in the country.

The pleasure was all the sweeter for being broadcast to around 8,000,000 fans who tuned in to the live TV coverage to see that Luton Town's hopes of staying in the top flight are not founded upon optimism alone.

A year ago Mr Pleat and his men were humiliated on the box when Manchester United thrashed the Town 5-0. This time the multi-million team from Old Trafford was second best.

Manager Ron Atkinson, grudging in his praise of Luton, refused to concede

By **BRIAN SWAIN**

that United's championship challenge was ended by the Town's win.

He might ponder on what might have been — if the Town had beaten league leaders Everton at Villa Park, a Wembley final against United could have been a marvellous scrap.

Sunday's match was as good as the semi-final, and included a period of self-doubt when United were stung by the Town's opening goal and equalised within three minutes.

"I feared that it was going to be the semi-final all over again," admitted Mr Pleat. "We had played so well, and then been pegged back. United began to assert themselves for the first time."

"But I thought that on the day we deserved to be winners."

Mr Atkinson complained that his defence let him down, which was less than fair to a Town midfield and attack which kept Gary Bailey much busier than Les Sealey for most of the game.

It also ignored the Town's greater will to win, to take the points which lifted them up to 17th place in the table.

Steve Foster and Mal Donaghy gave Mark Hughes and Frank Stapleton little clear sight of goal; Peter Nicholas competed grimly with the muscular and intimidatory Norman Whiteside, and Brian Stein and Mick Harford led an attacking thrust that reduced Graeme Hogg and Paul McGrath to panic stations at times.

Bryan Robson, Jesper Olsen and Arnold Muhren, all potential match-winners, vanished into 90 minutes of near-obscurity as the Town drove forward relentlessly.

Harford took the honours with two goals, his fourth double in his last six games, but Stein played a major role in unsettling a United defence which was made to look sluggish at times. Meka Nwajiobi's running and inventions also caused problems, although an injury slowed him down in the second half.

Mitchell Thomas and Tim Breacker, young men who might be forgiven if they cracked under recent pressure, repeated their Villa Park consistency, and Ricky Hilland David Preece com-



plemented Nicholas's hard work in midfield.

It was the Town's fifth victory in their last six league games, and their first over any of the First Division's glamour clubs since they won the Second Division championship three years ago.

Arsenal, Spurs, Liverpool and Manchester United had all been invincible in the past. The only success over Everton had been at a time when the Goodison Park club hit a wretched spell that had fans calling for Howard Kendall's sacking 18 months ago.

The pleasure for Luton fans was that Sunday's superb victory was earned on merit, with never a hint of luck about it. Preece and Stein forced Bailey to make top class saves in the first half, with Sealey matching them from the only threat he faced in the opening 45 minutes. He tipped a Whiteside header over the bar, then suffered with the rest of us when Harford got past Bailey but was crowded out by Hogg.

Attacking the Oak Road end after the break the Town surged forward and although Bailey did well to tip a 30-yard blaster by Nicholas over

the bar he was left hopelessly exposed in the 68th minute. Stein raced clear in pursuit of a long clearance header by Foster, Hogg's attempted back pass fell short, and Bailey denied Stein the goal he deserved with a blatant body-check.

Harford converted the penalty, but a scramble in the goalmouth three minutes later led to Whiteside scoring from close range, with the Town appealing in vain that Sealey had been held down to create the opening from Muhren's corner.

The Town of a year ago would probably have wilted after that as United tried to impose themselves on the game.

But Sealey kept them in it with a diving save to a drive by Robson, and the last-minute winner completed the day's delight.

Robson chopped down Preece just outside the penalty area, Foster cracked the free kick against the bar, and Harford thought quicker than half a dozen other men waiting for the ball to drop. He climbed above friend and foe alike to send a downward header into the net to confirm that Luton really are in the same league as the big boys now.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 2 MANCHESTER UTD 1
HALF-TIME: 0-0

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

MAN UTD: Bailey; Gidman, Hogg, McGrath, Albiston; Robson, Whiteside, Muhren, Olsen; Hughes, Stapleton. Sub: Duxbury, not used.

THE GOALS: Mick Harford for the Town, penalty, 68 mins, after Gary Bailey body-checked Brian Stein when he was clear; Norman Whiteside for United, 71 mins, from a scramble following a corner; Mick Harford again, 89th min, flying header after United were tangled up by Steve Foster's free kick hitting the bar and jetting into the air like a rocket.

OTHER STRIKES: Town seven saved, ten wide, one hit the bar and led to the winner; United eight saved and nine wide. Corners: 11-6 to United.

ATTENDANCE: 10,320, and the Town will ask for compensation from the TV income.

REFEREE: Tom Bune, Berkshire—pretty good but lenient in delaying Whiteside's booking until the 85th minute, and the Town thought the United equaliser should have been disallowed for a foul on Les Sealey.

ENTERTAINMENT: Great stuff, with the Town well deserving to win after going through a short sticky patch after United grabbed the equaliser. The TV audience must have loved it, especially on Merseyside.

● **EXPERT:** Mick Harford drives in his first penalty for the Town, to give them the lead in the 68th minute after Gary Bailey had brought down Brian Stein.

It was the Town's third penalty goal of the season, with David Moss on target against Southampton in September and Norwich last week.