

SPARKLING EXCELLENCE ENDS THE WORRY

RELEGATION favourites over the first half of the season, Luton Town flew out to the sunshine of Cyprus this week basking in the glow of a streak of championship form that ended their worries with two games to spare.

They turned on the heat against Leicester to get a win with a performance which was as impressive as the score-line suggests, and with four goals of quality to match the overall style.

And in the air of mixed relief and delight there is a quiet feeling of confidence around Kenilworth Road that the team David Pleat rebuilt in mid-season could be good enough to make a real impact in the First Division next season.

Leicester went the way of Arsenal and Manchester United to continue a revival that now mocks the fears a lot of us held when the Town slumped into the bottom three at the turn of the year.

The change in fortune is obvious enough: Steve Foster put some beef into central defence, Peter Nicholas put the bite into central midfield, David Preece added attacking invention on the left flank of midfield, and Mick Harford has soared into prominence and on to the fringe of the England squad with some remarkable talent in attack.

Mr Pleat thinks he has been a little lucky: he knew the men he wanted when the purse-strings were untied in November, but admits that the way his new men settled in so quickly has been a crucial element in the team's transformation.

Against Leicester, the "old guard" played as big a part in success. Since the shattering cup blow against Everton the Town have won 17 out of 24 points available, and it is not all down to the new men.

Saturday's performance was a beauty from every aspect. Tim Breacker and Mitchell Thomas have developed into top quality full-backs,

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and both showed their attacking abilities as well.

England centre-forward Gary Lineker never looked like adding to his season's tally of 29 goals against the twin obstacles of Foster's physique and Mal Donaghy's brain.

Nicholas did the midfield stopping job almost alone, leaving Preece and Ricky Hill to turn on the attacking style to good effect — and if England boss Bobby Robson had come to watch Lineker, Hill and Harford must have given him something to think about.

Ironically Harford was not at his inspiring best, yet at one notch below top form he still looked a lot better than Lineker, and his goal had the touch of aerial ballet about it that marks him out as more than just a big strong attacker. The balance, lightness of touch and sheer bravery added up to something special.

Brian Stein and Meka Nwajioji, full of tricks and cunning, are always liable to exasperate Town fans as well as opposing defenders, but each had a stunning answer to critics who worry about their inconsistency.

A clever header gave Nwajioji a goal from an



● FLOORED: Ricky Hill's legs are whipped from under him in desperation after he left four defenders for dead in a dazzling run.

equally clever cross by Stein, and Stein's killer goal for the Town was extra special, even by the standards the Town set for themselves.

But for all the excellence of the ten men who out-

played Leicester for all but a ten-minute spell, the result might have been so different if Les Sealey had not continued the astonishing form he has hit this season.

Leicester had lost defender Andy Feeley when they went a goal down, and were further behind before they got their reorganised formation into shape.

But in the last ten minutes of the first half they found gaps in a Town defence which was cheerfully pushing forward chasing more goals. Mark Bright, the sub, produced a flashing header from Paul Ramsey's cross, but Sealey flew to his left to make the best save of the match.

A few minutes later the goalkeeper was exposed again as the Town defence went through its only dodgy spell, and did well to block a shot by Tommy Williams. Alan Smith followed up the rebound, and Thomas cleared off the line when Leicester

looked likely to go in at the interval only one goal behind.

The Town always looked the more potent attacking team, with Foster driving forward confidently once he realised that Lineker would cause him little trouble.

Foster and Stein inter-passed to create an opening for Nwajioji, and although goalkeeper Ian Andrews half-smothered the shot the ball ran loose, Stein chipped in a careful centre from the right and Nwajioji lofted his header over Andrews and into the net.

FIRST-TIMER

In the 28th minute another well-backed attack ended with Hill laying the ball back into the path of Preece, and his first-time shot from 20 yards for his first goal since he got the winner on his Luton debut against Aston Villa in December.

Leicester, already clear of

the relegation scramble, seemed to have no stomach for the purposeful football the Town played, and the contest was as good as over when Foster instigated another successful raid nine minutes into the second half.

John O'Neill headed Foster's long ball out to Harford, he passed to Stein, and a quick control off the chest and an instinctive turn and shot into the corner was as good a goal as you could hope to see.

Leicester's attack vanished so completely that when Sealey at last had a long-range drive to pick up the Oak Road choir behind him sang: "What's it like to have a shot?"

Sealey had to make a save at Bright's feet on a rare Leicester break, but four minutes from time Harford, who began his Luton career with an injury-time equaliser on his debut at Leicester, headed the fourth from Breacker's centre.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 4 LEICESTER CITY 0
HALF-TIME: 2-0

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

LEICESTER: Andrews; Feeley (Bright, 19 mins), Williams, O'Neill, Wilson; Peake, Lynex, Ramsey, Banks; Lineker, Smith.

THE GOALS: Meka Nwajioji header, 14 mins; David Preece 20-yard cracker, 28 mins; Brian Stein, instant shot on the turn, 20 yards, 54 mins; Mick Harford header, 86 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town 11 saved and four wide; Leicester six blocked and two wide. Corners: 5-3 to the Town.

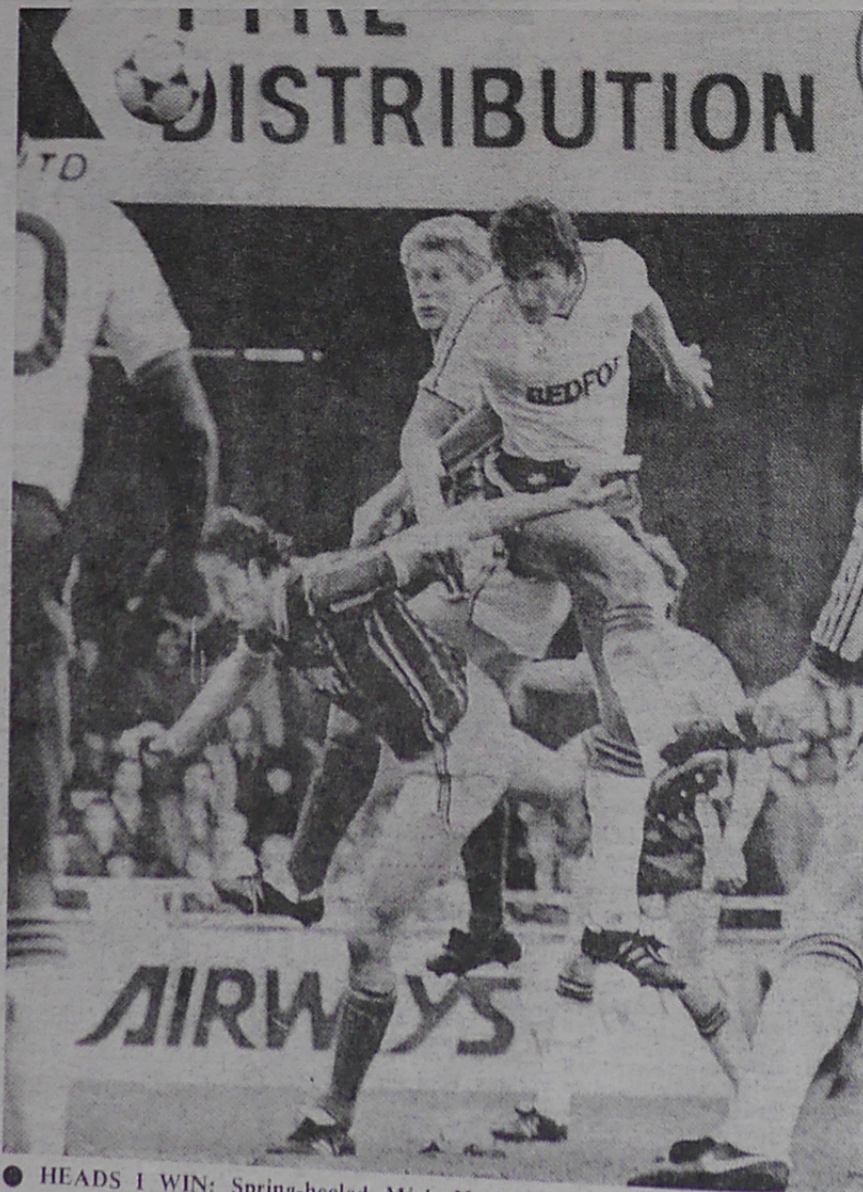
REFEREE: Les Burden, Dorset — doing his last Football League match, and was given one to enjoy.

ATTENDANCE: 11,802 — only Stoke and Sunderland, both already relegated, had smaller First Division attendances.

ENTERTAINMENT: Exactly what the home fans wanted — a quality performance by the whole Town team, and goals to match.



● HERE WE GO: Meka Nwajioji connects with a cross by Brian Stein to head the Town in front in the 14th minute.



● HEADS I WIN: Spring-heeled Mick Harford gets up to beat two City defenders to a first-half cross.



● SCREAMER: David Preece cracks one in from 20 yards to put the Town two up in the 28th minute.