

Late saves see off Hammers

FOR THE SECOND consecutive season excellent goalkeeping behind a strong Luton Town defence broke West Ham's hearts at Upton Park on Saturday. Last time Les Sealey was the defiant hero who saved a point in a 0-0 draw.

On Saturday it was Andy Dibble's turn, with two breathtaking late saves preserving a slender lead as the Town achieved their first win of the season.

But it was no one-man performance as the Town showed the crucial extra touch of steel and resolve they need to add to undoubted class and cleverness.

It showed most down the spine of the team, through Dibble, Paul Elliott and Mick Harford, but the whole team buckled down to deny West Ham the chance of snatching a point after Harford's 48th minute penalty.

Three days earlier the defence had lost concentration and composure to allow Newcastle to pull back a two-goal deficit for a point at St James's Park.

The lesson was well learned by the time West Ham launched their late assaults so that by the final whistle the Town had got away

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with the luxury of creating and missing a couple of chances on the break which should have settled it more comprehensively.

Elliott and Mal Donaghy blotted out the central threat from Tony Cottee and Frank McAvennie, Mitchell Thomas had a storming game back in his left-sided role and Rob Johnson returned to the side for his first game in 18 months to emerge with credit from a difficult assignment.

He played at right back, with Thomas moving over to the exclusion of Ashley Grimes on the left, and had the daunting task of coping with the pace and control of Alan Devonshire.

If Johnson's positional skills were occasionally to show a lack of experience, his spirit and determination in tackling and covering more than compensated.

Peter Nicholas helped with iron-hard power to keep West Ham's midfield quiet, Gary Parker linked up with attack with probing passing and running and David Preece harried and hustled to give the left-sided width.

Harford took delight in a tough physical battle with Alvin Martin, collecting a ref's lecture on the way. Brian Stein is beginning to look more like the old tricky stylist who can pull defenders out of position and Meka Nwajiobi's thoughtful running confused the Hammers mightily. Unfortunately he wasted a couple of chances to add to the lead in a second half in which the Town defended well and looked brilliant on the break.

The first half had been littered with mistakes and very little goalmouth excitement. Martin netted for West Ham after a 14th-minute scramble, but the goal was ruled out for an infringement.

Three minutes into the second half a smooth attacking move brought the decisive goal. Ray Stewart wasted a midfield free kick by giving the ball away to Nwajiobi, who ran at the West Ham defence from the half-way line.

Parker had gone into space on the right wing, and as a defender started to go wide to cover him Nwajiobi knocked a pass down the middle through the gap. Stein collected, got into the penalty area by side-stepping Martin's attempted challenge and Stewart, racing back to try to atone for his mistake, upended Stein when a goal looked nearly certain.

Harford, who had stood back to allow Parker to take a penalty which was saved at Newcastle, took the responsibility himself and beat Phil Parkes with a low drive to the keeper's right.

West Ham raised furious pressure in the attempt to salvage pride and a point, but in the last two minutes Dibble, diving spectacularly each time, produced memorable saves to turn piledrivers by Mark Ward and Greg Campbell round the post.

MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Dibble; Johnson, Elliot, Donaghy, Thomas; Parker, Nicholas, Preece; Stein, Harford, Nwajiobi. Sub: Mark North, not needed.

WEST HAM: Parkes; Stewart, Gale, Martin, Walford; Dickens, Orr, Devonshire; Ward, Cottee (Campbell 83), McAvennie.

THE GOAL: Mick Harford, penalty, 48 minutes, after Ray Stewart brought down Brian Stein.

OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved and four wide. West Ham eight saved, ten wide and one netted but disallowed for a foul. Corners: 9-2 to West Ham.

ATTENDANCE: 14,104, Upton Park's lowest league gate since they met Cambridge in the Second Division six years ago.

REFEREE: Terry Holbrook, Wolverhampton — had a very good game, and made a point of gripping bad tacklers with lectures and not the book. Mick Harford was one who benefited.

ENTERTAINMENT: Dreadful in the first half, on a soft grassy pitch, but fascinating in the second when the Hammers tried to batter their way through for an equaliser.