

CROWD ARE THE WINNERS

PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL'S determination to make itself a more attractive entertainment shone through a night of quality soccer and thrills when Arsenal fought back twice to earn a draw at Kenilworth Road on Tuesday.

It was the third time in four games so far that the Town had been unable to hold on to a lead to the final whistle, but disappointment was tempered by the knowledge that the dwindling numbers of customers were given tremendous value for money.

Two patched-up defences, each robbed of established stars, and two inventive attacks always looking to go forward made it a cracking game.

The Town were without Paul Elliott, who injured his left ankle at West Ham, and Steve Foster was still not fit enough to return. Peter Nicholas dropped back to partner Mal Donaghy in the centre of defence to face Charlie Nicholas and Tony Woodcock, and that was a splendid contest.

There was another at the other end, where Mick Harford discomfited Tommy Caton in the air, and Paul Mariner had to go on as sub to replace centre-half David O'Leary after only six minutes.

Each side could argue that the changes affected the outcome, and each could point to incidents where a winning goal might have been produced.

Arsenal took to the synthetic turf with little difficulty, and after two games its reputation is growing.

It most certainly suits the Town's style, and some of their quick passing movements were breathtaking for the mixture of speed, simplicity and accuracy.

The best illustration was the goal that left poor John Lukic picking the ball out of the net for his first touch, with the match just under two minutes old.

Andy Dibble punted a long clearance down the middle just into the Arsenal half. Mick Harford rose to beat Caton in the air and head the ball to the Town's left. David Preece collected, darted forward, hammered a low cross into the penalty area and Meka Nwajiobi side-footed a first-time gem.

Ricky Hill returned after injury, and while not at his brilliant best for the whole 90 minutes, contributed to some excellent teamwork.

But Arsenal are no soft touches and the Town were lucky when the driving midfield power of Stewart Robson left him with the chance to shoot from close range. He hit the post when he should have scored.

The luck balanced out early in the second half when Ian Allinson tore down the right wing, and smashed a low centre to the far post. Graham Rix hit the ball back equally ferociously and it bounced off Donaghy into the net.

LUTON 2, ARSENAL 2

For a spell Arsenal looked capable of taking the lead, but Dibble, who made a very good save from Woodcock just before the interval, made an even better one to get to a header by Robson.

But the Town always looked potent on the break, and after Hill and Harford created a chance which Gary Parker hit wide of the far post, a more concerted bout of pressure brought the second goal. Hill forced his way to the edge of the penalty area, an attempted clearance rebounded forward and Brian Stein pounced to drive a left-foot shot under Lukic.

The goalkeeper did well to tip a header by Harford over the bar to prevent the killer goal, but three minutes after Stein's score Woodcock and Charlie Nicholas combined with high-speed inter passing to put Woodcock through for the second equaliser.

That was with 19 minutes to go, and it would have been an injustice if either side had ended the night pointless after so much good football.

It included brawn as well as brain, although it was not as violent a match as Alan Seville's four bookings — the first in any Town match this season — might suggest.

The other disappointment was the small attendance. All-ticket games will cost the Town money — Tuesday's gate was the lowest for any Arsenal match since the last war. Those who stayed away missed a treat.

TOWN: Dibble; Breacker, Donaghy, Nicholas, Thomas; Parker, Hill, Preece; Harford, Stein, Nwajiobi. sub: Grimes, not used.

ARSENAL: Lukic; Anderson, O'Leary (Mariner, 10 mins), Caton, Sansom; Robson, Davis, Allinson, Rix; Nicholas, Woodcock.

THE GOALS: Meka Nwajiobi, second minute; Mal Donaghy own goal, 53 minutes; Brian Stein, 68 minutes; Tony Woodcock, 71 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved, seven wide; Arsenal six saved, five wide, one hit the post. Corners: 9-7 Arsenal.

ATTENDANCE: 10,012, badly effected by the game being an all-ticket match on police safety advice.

REFEREE: Alan Seville, Birmingham, Strict, and was consistent with the book.

BOOKINGS: Tim Breacker, Mick Harford, Viv Anderson and Paul Mariner, all for fouls.

ENTERTAINMENT: Top quality — a rip-roaring football match between two very good teams who will both be at the right end of the table all season if they continue to play like this.



● **FOILED:** Gary Parker bursts through in search of a second goal in the first half against Arsenal on Tuesday but is denied by a spreading save by John Lukic.

Parker, recalled to the team at West Ham when Ricky Hill was injured, justified his retention when the Town had to reorganise their midfield against Arsenal, with Peter Nicholas dropping back to become a stop-gap central defender.