

EARLY BLAST DOES IT FOR VILLA

AN Aston Villa team determined to regain its pride swamped Luton Town with a devastating early blast at Villa Park to give David Pleat and his men their first taste of defeat this season.

While Villa's sharp first-half finishing deserved to take the points — they were three up in the first 34 minutes — there was at least a positive indication after the interval that the Town are not as bad as the result might suggest.

It was Villa who looked short of confidence in the final half-hour, and with a little more composure and control in attack the Town could well have sneaked a point.

MISSING MEN

Both sides were short of experienced players. Villa, without a win in their four previous games, used six teenagers while Colin Gibson, Allan Evans, Gary Williams and Andy Gray sat on the sidelines nursing injuries. They also left out Steve McMahon, who was involved in transfer negotiations with Liverpool.

Villa's tearaway kids looked hungry for the ball, and determined to show the attitude that can compete well in the First Division. Sheer pace provided the platform for early success.

PROBLEMS

The Town's problems revolved round the absence of a recognised centre half. Steve Foster would surely have organised the back four to be more cohesive against his old club, and Paul Elliott would have provided a stronger link between defence and attack.

With both of them out of the team Peter Nicholas was again asked to partner Mal Donaghy in central defence, and the immediate effect was to cut down the Town's tackling strength in midfield.

Rob Johnson was recalled but his inexperience showed and the defence went through a harrowing experience as Villa's four-man midfield gained early ascendancy.

New boy Tony Daley looked like the twin of Mark Walters, and the pair of them displayed confident running on and off the ball, and a willingness to use tricky footwork to create openings, particularly down the flanks.

Behind them Steve Hodge was using his home debut to prove that Villa chose wisely when they bought him from Nottingham Forest.

There was an obvious hunger for success about Villa's early work, fired up by a goal in just under two minutes. Passes were direct and quick, and the confidence bubbled over after the early goal.

OVERWORKED

A burst of five Villa corners in the first seven minutes left an overworked Town defence in danger of collapse. The first produced a goal at a time when Villa were playing a notch above usual and the Town were a notch below.

Hodge's pass to the right flank sent Walters on a run. He edged ahead of Mal Donaghy, Andy Dibble tried to intercept on the corner of the penalty area and Walters got past both. Nicholas cleared the cross-shot off the line, but the corner was not cleared and Walters scored.

The Town threatened briefly at the other end, with Ricky Hill mishitting a shot after neat approach work by Mick Harford and Brian Stein, and Harford deserving a penalty which was not given when Brendan Ormsby held him down as both went for a high ball.

Villa looked much sharper, and Daley's jinking run down the left took out Tim Breacker and

Nicholas for Hodge to put Villa two up in the 16th minute with a deflected shot.

The Town were in danger of being swamped as the tiny crowd's encouragement echoed round Villa Park and Dibble had to make a couple of saves before he was beaten for the third time in the 34th minute.

CROSS-FIELD

The Town's covering was pulled all ways as Paul Birch hammered a long high cross-field pass from the right side of midfield towards the left corner. Breacker's attempt to head clear helped the ball on towards the flag, Walters retrieved it and from his low hard cross Dave Norton roared in to score from close range.

Yet for all their discomfort under pressure the Town looked capable of doing good things on the break, and slowly evened up the balance of play.

Meka Nwajiobi wasted a fair chance with a wild shot over the bar after Stein had passed carefully and accurately, and in the last minute of the first half Stein hit a screamer which Nigel Spink finger-tipped over the bar.

MORE LIKE IT

After the interval the Town started to look more like their old selves. Hill became more assertive in midfield and the hard-working Stein joined him in creating another opening for Nwajiobi.

His angled drive was saved, but Spink had no chance when the Town at last got reward in the 53rd minute. They had thrown caution aside and Breacker charged forward with the ball before slotting a perfect pass through a square defence.

Stein was equally cool with perfect quick control and instant shot past Spink.

EVAPORATED

Gary Parker replaced Johnson in midfield, and Villa's early confidence started to evaporate. They still created chances with quick breaks, but the Town looked just as likely to score.

Stein sparkled, going past Ormsby on a run which was halted by a desperate tackle by Norton, and then netting after Harford had headed down a long ball by Parker. Offside ruled that one out.

In the last five minutes the home crowd was pleading for an early whistle from the ref. Good passing by Nwajiobi, Hill and Stein created half a chance which Harford toe-poked over under pressure, and another smart move ended with Harford's drive being well saved by Spink.

Match details

ASTON VILLA 3, LUTON TOWN 1
HALF-TIME: 3-0

TOWN: Dibble; Breacker, Donaghy, Nicholas, Thomas; Hill, Johnson (Parker, 53 mins), Preece; Stein, Harford, Nwajiobi.
VILLA: Spink; Norton, Glover, Ormsby, Dorigo; Birch, Bradley, Hodge, Daley; Walker, Walters. Sub: Kerr, not used.

THE GOALS: Mark Walters, 2 mins; Steve Hodge, 16 mins and Dave Norton, 34 mins, all for Villa; Brian Stein for the Town, 53 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town seven saved, five wide, one netted as off-side whistle blew; Villa eight saved, seven wide. Corners: 7-5 to Villa.

ATTENDANCE: 10,524, lowest for a league game anyone at Villa Park could remember and 3,600 lower than for the Town's visit last season.

REFEREE: Dave Shaw, Sandbach. Enjoyed a pleasant afternoon as two teams got on with trying to play decent football throughout, with no hassles at all.

ENTERTAINMENT: Home fans enjoyed the first half immensely, with the Town cheering up their faithful followers with a better show in the second.



Report: Brian Swain—Pictures: Mark Richards