

Sucker punches at Hillsborough

SHEFFIELD WED 3, LUTON TOWN 2

THE result was more flattering than the team performance as the Town's football failed to flow at Hillsborough. The home side were basic and predictable, and would have been murdered if the Town had produced anything like their best.

The mystery is how the 11 players who were so impressive in the latter half of last season again failed to make the same impact.

The defence has now conceded eight goals in the last three away matches in the league and the forwards were disjointed and inconsistent.

The only player on the pitch who looked really classy was Brian Marwood, once a target of David Pleat when he was with Hull. His determination, hard running and good crossing from Wednesday's right midfield department turned the game for his team.

His work had a double bonus: his attacking thrust put him in direct competition with Mitchell

Thomas, and the young full-back was not able to make so many runs forward.

He has looked the nearest thing to a winger in the Town's recent games, but there was again a lopsided look about the Town's attempts to counter-attack at Hillsborough.

A scrappy game was not helped by a whistle-happy referee and 18 stoppages for offside. Ten times the Town were caught, and eight times Wednesday's long ball failed to stop linesmen flagging.

For the second week in succession Mick Harford was in bother with the ref. He deserved the booking Mr Allan Banks of Manchester administered for following through with a challenge after goalkeeper Martin Hodge had gathered the ball.

Other decisions were puzzling: Brian Stein was booked apparently for kicking the ball away when it looked as though he was simply passing it back for the free kick after being given offside.

David Preece collected the third caution for an innocent looking tangle with Hodge, and many

referees would not have called it a penalty when a hard cross struck Steve Foster near the elbow to lay on Wednesday's third goal.

There was a fair amount of promise about the Town's efforts to be positive, but the attack was unable to mount much consistent pressure and defensive errors compounded that problem.

Wednesday were slightly the better of two below-par teams in the first half, in which poor finishing took the shine off the few good moves.

The service to Harford was erratic, but he wasted an opportunity by shooting over the bar after Thomas had made the opening by an overlap run and cross.

At the other end Mel Sterland headed wide from a corner, Andy Blair had a piledriver deflected wide and Marwood shot wide from Sterland's break down Wednesday's right.

Neither side looked confident or poised, but the game was brought to life in the last two minutes of the first half, in which three goals were scored.

It went nearly three minutes into injury time, and Wednesday must have thought Christmas had arrived early as the Town unwrapped the goals for them.

A long punted clearance by Hodge was in the air long enough for Foster or Mal Donaghy to clear but was allowed to bounce and with Sealey halfway to meet a back pass that was never made Marwood nipped in to flick the ball over his head.

Within a minute Meka Nwajiobi made a foray down the right, crossed for Stein to get in a shot which Hodge blocked and Harford slammed in the rebound.

It was a classic illustration of how a defence can be caught sleeping after seeing a goal scored at the other end, but incredibly the Town fell for a similar sucker punch. From the restart Marwood was sent away down the right wing, and the covering was non-existent as the cross reached Lee Chapman on the far post for a simple header to make it 2-1.

Early in the second half the Town threatened to sort themselves out. Ricky Hill headed wide under pressure from Thomas's cross, Harford had a shot blocked and Foster's header from a corner by David Preece hit Stein and bounced wide.

You could sense that it needed just one Town goal to deflate Wednesday, but instead Sheffield got the breaks, culminating with Gary Thompson driving in a hard cross which Foster nudged with his elbow.

The linesman flagged for a penalty, Mr Banks agreed and Marwood stepped up to score his second to make it 3-1 after 61 minutes.

Harford replied two minutes later after Hodge dropped the ball when Stein distracted his attention, but Stein missed a fair chance a minute later when his weak shot was saved. The Town gently subsided after that.

Sealey did well to save a header by Mike Lyons from a cross by Marwood, Thompson missed contact with the goal at his mercy from Marwood's left-wing driven centre and Chapman hit the bar from a hard cross by Gary Sheldon.

Peter Nicholas, carrying an ankle injury, went off with 19 minutes to go, with Paul Elliott going on at right-back and Tim Breacker moving into midfield.

It was not enough of a change to make much difference, although Wednesday's substitution was equally no more than a gesture. Mark Chamberlain, newly signed from Stoke, replaced Thompson and was hardly noticed. He didn't need to be.

DETAILS

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Nicholas (Elliott, 71 mins), Preece; Nwajiobi, Harford, Stein.
SHEFFIELD WED: Hodge; Sterland, Lyons, Shirtliffe, Snodin; Marwood, Smith, Shelton, Blair; Thompson (Chamberlain, 77 mins), Chapman.

THE GOALS: Marwood for Wednesday, 44 mins; Harford for the Town, 45 seconds later; Chapman for Wednesday, two minutes into first-half injury time; Marwood penalty for Wednesday, 61 mins; Harford for the Town, 63 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved and three wide; Wednesday four saved, seven wide and one hit the bar. Corners: 8-2 to Wednesday.

ATTENDANCE: 17,887, Wednesday's lowest league gate of the season and one thousand down on the corresponding fixture last season.

REFEREE: Allan Banks, Manchester — decidedly finicky, but not the architect of the Town's defeat.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very poor for the Town followers. The Town looked a soft touch.