

DEFIANT OXFORD TEACH A LESSON

85/86
Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards

A DEPLETED and bedraggled Luton Town team left the pitch at Oxford looking much in need of this week's sunshine break in Trinidad.

They had missed a golden opportunity to cruise to their second league away win of the season by yielding the initiative just when they looked capable of having inferior opposition on the run.

Defiant Oxford, struggling to acclimatise in their first season at top level, deserved the equaliser, and with a little more luck could easily have sent the Town to their fourth consecutive away defeat.

Referee Ray Lewis takes some of the blame for reducing the contest to a 10-a-side match, but the Town brought problems on themselves by failing to match Oxford's hunger for the ball.

The lethargy included men who had to miss this week's Trinidad trip because of international calls, almost as if they had their minds on more prestigious occasions.

Manager David Pleat was angered by the ref and by the failure to build on a lead which bore the hallmark of the skill the team is capable of.

They opened with a couple of whirlwind-fast attacks which brushed aside a suspect Oxford defence.

Brian Stein's ball control trickery and David Preece's accurate cross gave the recalled Mick Harford space for a header which Steve Hardwick saved, and Mitchell Thomas stormed down the left wing and crossed to give Harford a shot which Hardwick blocked.

Steve Foster's head-down from a Preece free kick ended with Harford acrobatically going wide with an overhead kick, and with all those incidents happening in the first five minutes, the Town were well in command.

But the urgency evaporated, and Oxford, despite being without five regular first-teamers, made commitment and enthusiasm the equality of skill.

Andy Thomas, an emergency attacker because Billy Hamilton and Kevin Brock were both out through injuries, missed three clear chances that should have stung the Town into raising their game.

He hit the post from close range in the seventh minute after Les Sealey and Thomas were grounded in blocking John Aldridge's header from a left wing cross, then hit the other post from

an angle after a square defence had been caught out by a long through-ball.

Oxford played a basic long-passing, hard-running game, but true class shone out when Brian Stein whipped in his sixth goal of the season, turning and shooting right-footed in one movement from Harford's headed pass.

That was in the 23rd minute, but major changes had to be made eight minutes later when Thomas and Aldridge were sent off. The incident mystified and angered almost everyone in the ground.

Thomas had won a tackle and cleared the ball, despite falling down with Aldridge. Linesman John Biddle flagged furiously as the town went on to attack. Thomas and Aldridge had regained their feet and play was stopped.

The explanation of the double sending off was that Mr Biddle had seen the pair kicking each other, and on that Mr Lewis went by the book and dismissed them. In the second half he sent them both off again when he saw them sitting in the dug-out watching the game.

Both players denied that it was

anything more than a brief untidy tangle, and certainly the incident was over before the whistle blew. The question afterwards was whether the game as a spectacle should have been considered by the ref, even if he was right technically.

To be fair to Mr Lewis, those of us who did not see the clash can hardly criticise. To be fair to the players, Mr Pleat said he saw it clearly enough and at the worst it was a case of two men tangled up and perhaps deserving to be cautioned.

What upset the crowd was that they could not understand why two men had been sent packing, and Mr Lewis took stick from all sides of the terraces.

The pattern of the match changed. The Town pulled Peter Nicholas back into Thomas's position and left two in midfield. Oxford carried on with a striker missing.

The absence of Thomas turned out to be a bigger blow to the Town than Aldridge's departure was for Oxford.

The home side seemed to add a yard of pace and a ton of determination to their game after the interval, and right back David Langan became the man of the match.

Nicholas was struggling at left back, and with no overlapping down that side Langan had a field day charging up and down.

The Town's defence, dangerously square in the first half, became lopsided against growing pressure.

Ray Houghton steamed past Nicholas and crossed to provide the chance of an equaliser in the 61st minute. But the luckless Thomas, with Sealey stranded, headed over the bar from about four yards and was substituted shortly afterwards by Jeremy Charles.

The crowd sensed that the Town were rocky and the noise grew along the local confidence.

Match details

OXFORD UNITED 1, LUTON TOWN 1
HALF-TIME: 0-1

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Nicholas, Preece; Stein, Harford, Nwajiobi. Sub: North, not used.

OXFORD: Hardwick; Langan, Briggs, Shotton, Slatter; Phillips, Houghton, Hebberd, Rhoades-Brown; Thomas (Charles, 67 mins), Aldridge.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein, drilled drive from Mick Harford's headed knockdown, 23 mins; Trevor Hebberd for Oxford, blindside header from diagonal cross by Peter Rhoades-Brown, 88 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town seven saved and 11 wide; Oxford hit the post twice, eight saved and seven wide. Corners: 7-3 to Oxford.

SENT OFF: Mitchell Thomas and John Aldridge after a linesman said he saw them kicking each other in the 31st minute. Booked: Steve Foster for pulling back Aldridge as he went into a scoring position.

ATTENDANCE: 10,626, bettered only by the visits of Spurs and Liverpool to the Manor Ground so far this season.

REFEREE: Ray Lewis, of Great Bookham. Under fire from all sides for sending off two players for an offence he did not see. The match was not dirty or violent.

ENTERTAINMENT: Cracking excitement in the second half as Oxford chased the equaliser, but it was a very disappointing Town performance when they yielded the initiative to a team that had less craft and guile, but a lot more determination and enthusiasm.

Yet still the Town had chances to stifle both. Preece whipped a shot wide from Harford's probing pass and Meka Nwajiobi rounded off a couple of good moves with shots not good enough to make it 2-0.

Oxford were creating and missing clearer chances, and Sealey played for his place with some good saves, notably a flying catch from a header by Phillips.

Hardwick was lucky to escape at the other end when a piledriver by Stein bounced off his chest and became an involuntary clearance, but Langan's driving surges down the wing put Sealey under greater pressure.

The late equaliser, two minutes from time, involved the ref in

more controversy. The Town thought that Peter Rhoades-Brown handled before crossing a deep diagonal ball to the far post, and that Trevor Hebberd might have been offside when he came in to meet a perfect centre with a simple header into the net.

The Oxford player later admitted that there was contact between hand and ball, but said it was accidental. But he would not have been surprised to be pulled up for it.

I fear the offside claim was a case of clutching at straws, because Hebberd had come in from deep, unmarked and timing his run perfectly.

Except for the goals, perfection was in short supply all round.