

Liverpool are so nearly upstaged

LIKE A BUNCH of overawed provincial actors making their West End debut in front of a full house, the Town fluffed their lines for the first 45 minutes at Anfield.

But when the curtain went up for the second half, nerves had been calmed and the expensive talent gathered by Liverpool was all but upstaged.

If the inanimate props, in the shape of the crossbar in front of The Kop, and the bit players, the referee and linesmen, had not been so awkward, the point the Town nearly won would have been bagged.

They had the consolation of sharing the last curtain-call, with 31,000 customers well pleased with the entertainment served up. Liverpool starred in the first half and won it 2-0. The Town won the second 2-1.

It was, as manager David Pleat

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

said, a case of stage fright getting to the Town in the first 45 minutes, in an intimidating atmosphere for visitors to Anfield.

The Town have never beaten Liverpool on Merseyside, and at the interval the signs were that they had been set up for a pasting like the 6-0 drubbing they suffered at Anfield a couple of years ago.

But Liverpool and their demanding fans were shocked by the style with which the Town fought back against a side which had won all six of its previous home games. Only two visiting teams had managed to score, and none had looked like hitting two.

Yet the Town's inventive work in midfield and attack in the second half saw two well-deserved goals scored, two efforts hit the woodwork, and one scoring shot ruled out for a debatable offside.

Despite being without first choice Mitchell Thomas and Peter Nicholas, the Town reduced Liverpool to panic stations in defence, with Bruce Grobbelaar terror-struck and men like the elegant Mark Lawrenson glad to boot the ball into the Kop.

That was in marked contrast to the first half, when Liverpool stroked the ball around while the Town were struggling to weld into a solid unit with Rob Johnson at left-back and David Preece in the centre of midfield and Ray Daniel on his left.

Liverpool lined up with five men at the back and only Kenny Dalglish and Paul Walsh as permanent attackers, but the all-action support, with men getting up quickly from defence and

midfield, was superbly effective.

The Town had to defend and look for something on the break, and should have scored the first goal when Meka Nwajiobi broke clear of a defence appealing in vain for offside. He had only the goalkeeper ahead of him, but the temporary limelight must have been blinding and the shot was well wide.

Ricky Hill later had a similar chance, but put his drive too close to Grobbelaar, and by then Liverpool were beginning to control things.

The raucous Kop seemed to suck attacks towards it, and Craig Johnston was invited to attack Rob Johnson and get to the byline.

Under increasing pressure Les Sealey made a good tip-over save from Whelan, and blocked shots by Jan Molby and Jim Beglin — both defenders in attacking positions — as Liverpool used the full width of the pitch to build attacks.

Molby strutted centre-stage of almost every Liverpool attack, and was involved in the build-up as Walsh showed all the old sharpness to score twice in four minutes against his old club.

His first was from an opening created by Molby and Steve McMahon, with Sealey unlucky with an attempt to spread himself — the crisp low drive went under his legs.

That was in the 30th minute, and four minutes later an incisive move of quick passing and a penetrating run by Johnston brought the second. He got round Johnson, hammered a low cross goalwards, and Walsh swept in a close-range chance.

Bigger clubs than Luton would wilt under the onslaught Liverpool produced, but there was a massive transformation after the break.

For the first time Liverpool came under pressure as Hill and Preece wrestled away the previous midfield control.

Barely a minute had ticked away when Brian Stein wandered over to the right and crossed to the far post. Lawrenson was relieved to concede the corner as Grobbelaar dropped the ball under challenge from Mick Harford. Preece's corner was back-headed by Nwajiobi at the near post, and the ball pinged around in a forest of bodies in a scramble which ended with Foster hooking home a goal from three or four yards.

Liverpool's composure drained as the Town went for them. Lawrenson held back Hill to block one attack, and Preece's 20-yard free-kick curled agonisingly close to the angle of bar and post before sliding wide with Grobbelaar nowhere near it.

Shortly afterwards Lawrenson handled to stop Nwajiobi going through, to concede another 20-yard free-kick. Grobbelaar, with every reason to worry about the likely result, demonstrated dissent much better than anything else he had tried and was booked.

Match details

LIVERPOOL 3, LUTON TOWN 2

HALF-TIME: 2-0

LIVERPOOL: Grobbelaar; Nicol, Lawrenson, Hansen, Molby, Beglin; Johnston, Whelan, McMahon; Walsh, Dalglish. Sub: MacDonald, not used.

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Johnson; Hill, Preece (Grimes 81 minutes), Daniel; Stein, Harford, Nwajiobi.

THE GOALS: Paul Walsh two for Liverpool, 30 and 34 minutes; Steve Foster for the Town, 46 minutes; Jan Molby for Liverpool, 64 minutes; Mick Harford for the Town, 75 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved, seven wide, two hit the bar; Liverpool seven saved, ten wide, one hit the bar. Corner: 8-7 to Liverpool.

ATTENDANCE: 31,488 — 1,500 below Liverpool's average, but the biggest crowd to watch any Town match so far this season.

REFEREE: Maurice Robinson, West Midlands: The Town thought he was conned by Paul Walsh when the free-kick was given for Liverpool's third goal, and that his linesman let him down when Rob Johnson netted with Meka Nwajiobi offside. It was ruled out to prevent the Town making the score 2-2.

BOOKED: Bruce Grobbelaar for showing dissent when Mr Robinson awarded a free-kick against Liverpool; Ashley Grimes for a reckless late tackle on Jan Molby.

ENTERTAINMENT: A very good game once the Town had got over the first-half stage fright. With only a little luck they would have put the season's first dent in Liverpool's 100 per cent home record.

But the wall fended off Foster's free-kick, and Liverpool were shortly to show how such situations can be turned into goals.

The Town looked well capable of getting an equaliser, and referee Maurice Robinson had a problem when Johnson broke through on Liverpool's right. He beat the offside trap, but a linesman flagged because Nwajiobi was offside, perhaps ten yards to Johnson's right. Mr Pleat thought Johnson should have been waved on, but the ref took the easy way out for any official at a place like Anfield. He blew for offside against the Nigerian a second before Johnson's shot ripped past Grobbelaar into the net.

At this stage Liverpool were looking nervy and out of sorts, but Walsh set up the killer goal in the 64th minute. He went on a dribble across the face of the penalty, found himself completely boxed in, and went down.

Mr Pleat had seen it all before: with no opening in view Walsh waited for a tackle, dived over it, and won the free-kick, just as he used to do for the Town.

If the opening was a little lucky, Molby's execution was near perfection. The Town's wall may have been a man too short, and one member of it broke off from the end a second too early. Molby curled the 20-yarder round the edge and into the net.

Yet once more the Town found the spirit of enterprise to take the game to Liverpool, and Grobbelaar and his jittery colleagues were saved twice by the bar in rapid succession.

First Harford headed against it from a corner by Preece, and in the ensuing scramble Foster hooked a shot against the same spot. From the rebound Harford headed towards the top corner and to everyone's surprise, the Kop's included, Grobbelaar dived and held the ball.

He was at fault when the Town pulled it back to 3-2 with 15 minutes to go. Harford, whose co-operation with the sparkling Stein had caused all sorts of embarrassment for Liverpool, tried a curling and dipping shot from at least 25 yards, Grobbelaar dived too late and the ball went in off the inside of the post.

Liverpool closed it down after that, and there was little more of note, save for a booking for Ashley Grimes when he went on as sub and unloaded man-of-the-match Molby, and a header by Whelan which hit the top of Sealey's bar.