

NORWICH RING DOWN THE CUP CURTAIN

LUTON TOWN 0
NORWICH CITY 2

95/86
(P.C.)

"OUR worst performance of the season", was the simple summing up of manager David Pleat after the Town's Milk Cup hopes were curdled by Second Division organisation and determination.

The unbeaten home record — 11 matches since Nottingham Forest's visit last April — never looked like surviving once Norwich had scored twice in six minutes in the first half.

They played with a fierce determination to hold on to the trophy they won at Wembley last season, with teamwork and organisation good enough to frustrate a Town side that had a collective off day.

One of the biggest disappointments was that the young players brought in as replacements when changes were forced failed to make an impact. But the same was true of the seniors, and at least the shock should make them all the more determined to take care of Birmingham City on Saturday.

Only in the first five minutes did the Town look as though they might keep the plastic success story running into another chapter.

But Mick Harford's booming 20-yard volley from Ricky Hill's cross whistled over the bar, and Ian Culverhouse made a saving tackle when Meka Nwajobi threatened to break through.

The Town's passing fell away, the jitters set in, and uncharacteristic long hopeful passes were tried, and duly taken care of by Norwich.

It took the Town 47 minutes to

win their first corner and more than an hour to get a decent shot on target. By then Norwich had taken two crisp goals, and organised their defence to protect Chris Woods.

The second-half corner count was 8-0 to the Town, but too often it was a case of frantic and optimistic attacking failing against a team which showed how easy it can be to protect a two-goal lead.

Referee Brian Hill upset home fans by not giving a couple of penalties for hands, yet those appeals bore the mark of desperation and frustration that set in on the pitch as the minutes ticked away.

Peter Nicholas was the man who was most missed. Without his tackling there was precious little backbone in midfield. Harford and Brian Stein had little in the way of consistent good service and were carefully marshalled by Dave Watson and Steve Bruce.

Ray Daniel came into it down the left flank when the Town put on pressure in the second half without being able to deliver a telling final pass or shot.

Norwich midfielder Mike Phelan was a bigger influence. In the 28th minute he backed up an attack, had a shot blocked by Les Sealey, but swept the rebound back across the face of the goal and Peter Mendham scored.

Six minutes later Mr Hill gave a debatable free kick to Norwich 20 yards from goal, for a foul by Mal Donaghy on Kevin Drinkell.

As at Liverpool on Saturday the Town failed to organise defence for a set piece. Two short touches, by Mendham and David Williams,

led to Bruce smashing a shot into the corner of the net.

For the second half Hill switched to the centre of midfield, with Gary Parker moving to the right, and the Town attacked with a will.

Woods dived well to make his first save, from Nwajobi in the 63rd minute, but was given splendid protection as Norwich confidently set about preserving their lead.

Woods saved well from Harford twice, and the centre-forward, one of the few Town men to look close to normal form, saw a volley hacked clear by Mendham when Woods was beaten.

Yet Norwich could have doubled their lead, with Drinkell's pace and strength twice getting him past a stretched defence on the break. Sealey foiled him the first time, and the shot was wide on the second occasion.

Norwich won't know how lucky they were to meet the Town on a night when they were so far below normal form, but well deserved their win.

DETAILS

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Johnson (Grimes, 67 mins); Parker, Hill, Daniel; Stein, Harford, Nwajobi.

NORWICH: Woods; Culverhouse, Watson, Bruce, Van Wyk; Barham, Mendham, Williams, Phelan; Drinkell, Rosario. Sub: Brooke, not needed.

THE GOALS: Peter Mendham, 28 mins; Steve Bruce, 34 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved and eight wide; Norwich four saved and four wide. Corners: 8-3 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 8,202.

REFEREE: Brian Hill, Kettering.

ENTERTAINMENT: Ruined for Town fans by a below-par performance.