

STEIN'S DOUBLE IS THE TONIC

RELGATION CANDIDATES Manchester City were lucky to go home with self-respect more or less intact from their first experience of the Town's synthetic surface.

They could easily have been hammered as heavily as Southampton were six weeks ago.

Yet at the end they were able to claim that they might have snatched a point. A late penalty halved the Town's lead and in the closing stages City produced a frantic attacking burst.

The major difference between the sides was that the Town's approach was measured, controlled and incisive, with goalkeeper Eric Nixon the main stumbling block to an attack led with sparkling skill by Brian Stein.

The two goals he scored had four other worthy efforts stopped by the goalkeeper.

The Town were not quite firing on all cylinders, but were still too good for a City side which already looks ahead with some foreboding to the last day of the season — City v Luton at Maine Road.

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

It might be a half-repeat of the May 1983 showdown. But this time the Town will surely go to Manchester as a top team.

City manager Billy McNeill thinks the synthetic pitch will help.

He had no complaints about the surface, but made the point that the Town have the skilled players perfectly suited to it, while visiting teams have a subconscious doubt in their minds because to them it is unfamiliar.

Both managers were reasonably happy with their sides' performances, and McNeill led the praise for Stein, who is now looking even better than when Bobby Robson picked him for England.

Each side was forced into defensive changes, with the Town recalling Paul Elliott for a farewell appearance in place of injured Steve Foster, and City losing centre half Kenny Clements and replacing him with the inexperienced Nigel Johnson.

Elliott was a little rusty early on, but like the rest of the team deserved to be a winner on the day.

City were all but swamped in the first half, and fortunate to be only one down at the break.

Their 4-4-2 formation was swept aside, with skipper for the day Peter Nicholas winning every tackle in midfield and Mitchell Thomas getting well up in support of the attacks.

Thomas and David Preece worked the left flank beautifully, and if City managed to keep Mick Harford quiet by his standards, they paid the price by having no man spare to try to shackle Stein.

Except for the late desperate

rush the City attack, starved of service from a midfield that had no concentrate on defence, made very little impression.

Les Sealey had a quiet 80 minutes before the mini-storm, but made a vital one-handed save from Clive Wilson shortly after Stein had scored the first goal.

That arrived as the result of Thomas's first overlap of the day. Nicky Reid fouled him near the corner flag. Preece's free kick was smacked hard towards the near post, and Stein flicked in a first-time goal.

There could have been four or five more by half-time, with the Town playing quick accurate passes to create a string of openings.

City escaped thanks to Nixon's heroics and an occasional over-anxious touch by the Town.

The worry was that so much possession failed to bury the visitors, and they should have equalised five minutes before the break when a clearance by Mal Donaghy was charged down and David Phillips was left clear on a solo run.

Sealey got the angle right, and Phillips shot wide when he should have been on target.

City's problems increased when Wilson was carried off unconscious in the 41st minute after a collision with Mick McCarthy and Elliott.

City fought harder in the second half, but the Town still looked the more likely attacking side, and the goal we thought had settled it arrived in the 64th minute.

It began with Preece sending a free kick into the box. A mad scramble developed, with Elliott and Harford both having efforts blocked before



the ball was finally forced home by Stein.

Meka Nwajiobi limped off with a cut head and an injured foot which turned out to be a broken toe-bone, but the only danger to the Town's hopes seemed to be the mist that thickened up as the last few minutes approached.

City's lifeline was thrown when Tim Breacker was adjudged to have fouled overlapping Paul Power. Mark Lillis finally had a clear sight of goal as he scored from the penalty.

The Town hit back with Harford unlucky to see a header bounce on to and over the bar, but the final action was at the other end with desperation sparking City into a furious burst of attacking.

The Town survived it, as they deserved to. Over 90 minutes they had played the good football, and some of the first-half stuff had been pure brilliance.

● DEFENDER ATTACKS: Mal Donaghy joins in the assault on City's goal.

Match details

LUTON TOWN 2 MAN. CITY 1

HALF-TIME: 1-0

85/86

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Elliott, Donaghy, Thomas, Hill, Nicholas, Preece, Stein, Harford, Nwajiobi (Daniel, 70 mins).

MAN. CITY: Nixon; Reid, McCarthy, Johnson, Power, May, Phillips, McNab, Wilson (Baker 41 mins); Davies, Lillis.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein two for the Town, 3 and 64 minutes; Mark Lillis penalty for City, 83 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town 11 saved, one hit the bar and ten wide; City three saved and six wide. Corners: 11-8 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 10,096 — improving match by match, and the best since Manchester United's visit two months ago.

REFEREE: David Axcell, Southend. Neither side had any complaints about his contribution.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good value for money again, with half a dozen more Town goals threatened but not delivered.