

Hammers are so nearly nailed

RECORD - chasing West Ham nicked a Christmas present from a deserving cause at Kenilworth Road on Saturday.

They went home with a point, and very glad of it, after being on the receiving end of a Luton Town performance which was close to great heights in everything but the finishing touch.

"It's all about chances, and we didn't put them away," said manager David Pleat, rightly disappointed that his side had taken so little from so much effort.

The Hammers arrived with two records in their sights. One they had already achieved, with a run of nine successive league victories, four of them in away games.

The other target was to equal a West Ham record of going 18 league games without defeat, and they clung on to that one thanks to the Town's generosity in front of Phil Parkes and a little luck.

The record was set up four years ago when West Ham won the Second Division championship with only four league defeats in the whole season. Two of them were inflicted by Luton Town.

Another double should have been completed this time, although in the closing minutes West Ham created

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

their one clear chance of the match and could have pinched all three points.

That would have been a travesty, because in the second half particularly the action flowed constantly towards Parkes.

Mitchell Thomas won the sponsors' bubbly as man of the match for his mixture of sensible defending, rugged tackling, and physical presence when West Ham showed that they are no longer the soft touches they used to be when games were going against them.

My nomination would have bracketed the other three defenders with Thomas. Tim Breacker was faced by Alan Devonshire, and played him so well that Ricky Hill had little need to worry about stopping the clever midfielder, and was able to turn on plenty of attacking style.

The real secret of keeping a clean sheet against a team that had failed to score in only four of its previous 20 league games, was the work of Steve Foster and Mal Donaghy.

Foster's performance was all the more satisfying because a well-kept secret in the Town camp was that he had been sent home and missed training the day before the game to shake off a flu bug.

He then shook off the worries about Frank McAvennie, the First Division's leading scorer. For only the second time this season the Scottish golden boy was anonymous, just as he had been against Donaghy and Paul Elliott at Upton Park in August.

Foster and Donaghy gave him only one half chance, in the first few minutes, and that came to nothing because Donaghy's covering was too quick, and blocked the attempted drive.

A neat dummy from a cross by Mark Ward was McAvennie's only other contribution near the Town penalty area, and Devonshire wasted it by driving the ball into the defensive cover.

A gusting wind stopped the game being as good as it might have been, and drew attention to one drawback of the synthetic surface — it is so flat and level that it can be difficult to make the ball stand still for goal kicks and free kicks.

West Ham hardly looked as good as their record, the best team in the country on current form.

Peter Nicholas tanked through midfield to deny them any sort of superiority there, and David Preece is doing wonders in a team that would, without him, look lopsided for want of a natural winger.

Andy King was relegated to sub, with the inexperienced Mark North being given his third senior game in attack. Poor West Ham at first thought he was Stacey North, a defender, and went home even more confused when Mr. Pleat told them after the game that of course they were wrong — the North who played was in fact a goal-keeper.

At 19 the lad has potential, a willingness to get stuck in, and sometimes an uncanny resemblance to Mick Harford. If he develops as well as Harford the Town will have unearthed another gem, but in the meantime we have to be patient and accept that the occasional need to pitch youngsters into big games is a necessity for a club that cannot afford the depth of spare talent needed to win championships.

North was close to a memorable day. Alvin Martin

and Tony Gale were obviously under orders to concentrate on trying to keep Harford quiet, and did a very good job.

Harford responded with some intelligent wandering to try to pull the West Ham defence out of shape, and with Brian Stein doing the same three difficult chances fell to North.

In the first half the Town had three near misses, with Hill bursting through after a smooth passing move to shoot wide, then nipping past the wall at a free kick to hook Preece's clever chip over the bar. The third was a rasping drive by Harford which Parkes tipped round the post.

With the breeze behind them after the interval the Town had West Ham pinned back and hoping for little more than survival.

Parkes and the woodwork, plus a succession of shots and headers inches the wrong side of the target, saw them through like a punch-drunk boxer staggering through the last round when a knock-out looks inevitable.

The Hammers had ten men back for long periods, and escaped when Parkes tipped a Hill piledriver onto a post, and again when Donaghy's header from Preece's far post free kick bounced onto and over the bar.

The crazy aspect of it all was that the visitors might have made it disaster for the Town because with five minutes to go Foster and Donaghy lost their usual understanding and Ray Stewart's long diagonal ball towards the left wing put Tony Cottee in with the sort of chance championship teams take.

Fortunately for the Town Les Sealey was quick to move out to narrow the angle and Cottee drove wide of the far post.

But all the talk in the pressroom was about how McAvennie, the star West Ham nicked from under Luton's noses, had been so ineffective. "It's the tightest I have ever seen him held," said Hammers coach Ronnie Boyce. "We're very pleased to get away with a point."

Match details

LUTON TOWN 0 WEST HAM UTD 0
TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Nicholas, Preece; Stein, North, Harford. Sub: King, not used.

WEST HAM: Parkes; Stewart, Gale, Martin, Walford; Ward, Dickens, Orr, Devonshire; McAvennie, Cottee. Sub: Parris, not used.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town four saved, ten wide, two hit the woodwork; Hammers one saved, four wide. Corners: 10-5 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 14,599, the Town's second highest of the season, with only half of West Ham's forecast 8,000 making the trip.

REFEREE: Dennis Hedges, Oxford. Has a reputation for being quick with the book, but allowed the game to flow and contented himself with a caution for Neil Orr of West Ham for a push to stop Mitchell Thomas on one of his many overlapping power-runs.

ENTERTAINMENT: Remarkably good for a game that produced no goals, with the Town turning on lots of attacking style in the second half but unable to get the finish right. Gusty wind was a problem for both sides.



● OUCH: Brian Stein and Mark North suffer as another half-chance comes to nothing under a challenge by Phil Parkes.

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