

SPORTSNEWS

Town match verdict ★★ ★

Boss content with holiday haul

WEST BROM 1
LUTON TN 2

THE team anchored at the bottom of the First Division and with little hope of avoiding relegation gave the Town a hard fight at the Hawthorns on Boxing Day.

West Brom had some players who showed a lot of class, notably Steve Mackenzie and Steve Hunt in midfield, but were a poor team unit.

The outstanding moment's skill came when Steve Foster's free kick was met by Mick Harford's brilliant volley towards the top corner, only to be kept out by an equally brilliant finger-tip save by Tony Godden.

The saddest moment was when former Town midfielder star Tony Grealish was subbed after 57 minutes of ineptness.

Mark North put the Town ahead in the fourth minute, from the rebound after Brian Stein's back-heeler hit the bar. Imre Varadi equalised with a near post header from a left wing cross in the 33rd minute, but in stoppage time at the end of the first half Harford drove in a 20-yard winner.

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

ALBION: Godden; Nicholl, Bennett, Robertson, Statham; Mackenzie, Grealish (Dennison, 57 mins), Hunt, Thomas; Varadi, Reilly. REF: Alan Robinson, Manchester. ATTENDANCE: 12,508.

GOAL attempts: Town 8 saved and wide; Albion 3 saved and eight wide. Corners 6-5 to Albion.

FOUR POINTS from the two Christmas away games against teams fighting for First Division survival left David Pleat a very happy manager as he left Portman Road on Saturday night.

The odd thing was that the Town had been much more dominant against disjointed Ipswich to take only one point than they had been at West Brom, where they took three.

Bobby Ferguson's men were lucky to escape a real pasting, yet came within eight minutes of snatching an unlikely victory.

Beset by injury problems before the game — they were without Romeo Zondervan, Trevor Putney, Ian Atkins and Trevor Parkin — they pointed an accusing finger at Mick Harford when they lost central defender Ian Cranson at half-time with concussion.

The Town striker later collected his sixth booking of the season and in an ill-tempered few minutes Ipswich sub Alan Sunderland was also cautioned for taking a retaliatory kick at Harford.

Mr. Pleat defended his player in the Press conference, saying that he did not see Harford land a punch on Sunderland. I am sorry to report that I did, but cannot confirm Ipswich claims that Harford's elbow laid out Cranson just before the interval.

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

Ferguson summed up the game fairly accurately: "Luton had control of it for most of the time, and the icy surface suited them. We just had to battle, despite the disruptions to our side, and I am proud of the way our lads did that."

Battling hard work was the limit of what Ipswich had to offer in the attempt to pull out of the relegation zone. They were given an early confidence-lifter with the sort of goal I doubt would have been given away if Steve Foster had been on the park.

Stacey North, the 21-year-old brought back from a three-game loan spell with Wolves in the Third Division, deputised for Foster, suffered cruelly through inexperience

when the goal was conceded, then put it all behind him to become one of the Town's successes.

More experienced men had boomed before he did, notably in the sixth minute when a Town attack broke down with Tim Breacker losing possession in midfield.

Mark Brennan set off from the half-way line on a solo run, Mal Donaghy left him to play Kevin Wilson offside, and Brennan declined to make the pass Donaghy anticipated. Instead he kept going, with skipper for the day Peter Nicholas unable to catch him, but the Town were saved when Les Sealey advanced and smothered the shot in a one-to-one confrontation.

The Ipswich goal came four minutes later. Kevin Wilson tried a run across the face of the penalty area, North dived in for a challenge he need not have made, and the free-kick was given.

The defensive marking from the set piece fell apart. Ipswich tried to take the free kick quickly, and the ball was pushed sideways to unmarked Nigel Gleghorn on the left wing.

Referee Allan Gunn ordered them to take it again, and they did the same.

Once more Gleghorn was left alone on Ipswich's left side of the penalty area. Jason Dozell pushed the ball to him, the Town defence stood off and waited for a pull-back, and Gleghorn shot into the far corner.

Ferguson claimed later that Ipswich should have gone two up in the first half when Breacker pulled back Gleghorn in the box, and I agree that the Town were lucky to escape a penalty award.

But Ipswich were far luckier as the Town got their game together.

Stacey North got a grip on Mich D'Avray, who had to be pulled back into defence for the second half to make way for the ineffective Sunderland, and Nicholas closed up

most of the midfield thrust.

Mitchell Thomas and David Preece sparked countless passing movements to pull the Ipswich defence out of place and Brian Stein, hovering behind Harford and Mark North, almost had a field day.

His twists and turns caused all sorts of problems for Cranson, Terry Butcher and later D'Avray, and Ipswich never looked like clamping down to Stein.

Unhappily for him as the Town's more classy approach gave them near-total domination he missed two of the best chances, heading over from six yards from Thomas's first-half cross and then shooting over in the second half when Breacker's cross and Harford's knock-down produced another close-range chance.

Mark North was denied by a goal-line clearance after Stein wriggled past Steve McCall and goalkeeper Paul Cooper, although at the other end Stacey North saved the Town with a similar covering job when Mal Donaghy's miscued header put D'Avray through on his own.

Ipswich became desperate in their attempts to safeguard their narrow lead, and full physical commitment from both sides turned it into a fascinating struggle.

The Town always looked the better footballing outfit, and Mr. Pleat said later that even if they had lost he would have been pleased by

Match details

IPSWICH 1 LUTON TOWN 1

HALF-TIME 1-0

TOWN: Sealey, Breacker, Stacey North, Donaghy, Thomas, Hill, Nicholas, Preece, Stein, Mark North, Harford. Sub: Johnson, not needed.

IPSWICH: Cooper, Yallop, Cranson, Sunderland, 4 mins, Butcher, McCall, Stockwell, Brennan, Dozell, Wilson, D'Avray, Gleghorn.

THE GOALS: Nigel Gleghorn for Ipswich, low drive when unmarked from a free-kick; Mark North for the Town, 82 minutes, from David Preece's clever chipped pass.

OTHER STRIKES: Town seven saved and eight wide; Ipswich five saved and six wide. Corners: 8-7 to the Town.

REFEREE: Alan Gunn, Burgess Hill. Struggles to control things when the pace and fury of the contest rose for a brief spell in the second half, but Harford and Sunderland both deserved their bookings.

ATTENDANCE: 16,155 — above the Ipswich average thanks to a good following from Luton.

ENTERTAINMENT: Near-classic confrontation between the Town's skill and Ipswich's basic determination and "battle for survival" approach. The skill should have taken all three points.

the general level of performance.

The good thing was that the Town showed no signs of panic or desperation as the minutes ticked away and chances were missed, and the overdue but deserved equaliser was the product of cleverness that was a cut above Ipswich's kick-and-hope.

It began with Stein on the right wing pulling the ball back to man of the match Preece in the inside left

position on the edge of the box. Ipswich tried to crowd him out, but he deftly flicked a steep chipped pass over the would-be markers and Mark North nipped in to stab home his fourth goal in seven appearances — and two of those were as sub.

There is no doubt that the Town deserved their point, but I came home feeling disappointment. They really should have had all three to round off a remarkable year of revival and progress.



WINNER: Mick Harford's 11th goal of the season gives the Town victory at West Brom.



EQUALISER: Mark North stabs in the late point-saver at Portman Road. Steve McCall is the defender trying too late to intervene, while Brian Stein is the other Town player in attendance.



● SO NEAR: Brian Stein beats the cover for a header at Ipswich, but his effort flew wide.