

So what more 85/86 have to

WITH FOOTBALL hotting up the debate on the virtues or vices of synthetic pitches, it was a pity that Luton Town and QPR were unable to hit top form at Loftus Road on Saturday.

The Town well deserved their point, but neither side seemed to be able to cope with the Omniturf as well as teams do on the SporTurf at Kenilworth Road.

England manager Bobby Robson had been due to attend, to look at Mick Harford among others, but stayed away. "Not a bad judge, is he?" was Rangers manager Jim Smith's after-match comment.

Smith was honest enough to admit: "Luton were the better team. But they didn't create many chances so perhaps a draw was a fair result."

Rangers set the Town few problems, with the pace of Wayne Fereday down their left the only weapon that looked menacing. Rob Johnson, the man with the bionic knees after two horrendous injuries that would have finished most players, battled through doggedly to blunt most of Fereday's threat.

And when he was struggling to contain the man described by David Pleat as "the quickest forward in the First Division" the wily experience of Steve Foster came to the rescue.

Three times he halted the

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

Rangers man with tackles a little less than legal. The third earned the Town skipper a booking, in the 87th minute.

There were times when other players showed a nervous determination to give nothing away, with a succession of free kicks preventing the game from flowing.

Offside also interrupted proceedings too often to make it a top quality spectacle. The Town were caught 12 times and Rangers twice. The temptation to castigate Rangers for such a boring tactic is balanced to some extent by the thought that professional footballers should not be caught out that often.

The Town's problem was that they were without Brian Stein, and that Andy King, the natural choice for his position just behind the front two, was unavailable through injury.

Mike Newell was recalled, and it was a case of "three of a kind" in attack as he worked alongside Marc North and Mick Harford.

Harford, inevitably, responded well to the extra responsibility thrust upon him. He did well to pull Steve Wicks out of position to remind everyone that being a strong bustling centre-forward is not the limit of Harford's abilities.

The midfield was almost entirely controlled by the Town, and I got the feeling that Rangers were so frightened of the Town's potential in that department that they tried to cut it out.

Ricky Hill looked the

most accomplished ball-player in the middle, and after Peter Reid of Everton dropped out of the England party to play a friendly in Israel deserved his second consecutive call-up for international recognition.

But it left me wondering what more Harford has to do after a controlled and disciplined performance that could easily have yielded him a couple of goals.

Wicks saved Rangers in the eighth minute when the admirable Mal Donaghy, so cool and consistent that you almost take him for granted, split the defence with a long ball into Harford's path.

The striker controlled it on his chest, shot accurately from an angle, and looked like opening the score as the ball took a slight deflection off Newell, with goalkeeper Paul Barron already beaten.

But Wicks got back to head off the line, and for a spell Rangers had to defend hard. Two half-chances fell to Foster as the Town pushed forward and won a couple of corners, but each was sent wide, one from a first-time flying hook shot and the other from a bicycle kick.

It came as a surprise when Rangers took the lead in the 35th minute. Mitchell Thomas was penalised for a foul on Warren Neill, who sent the free kick into the penalty area. Wicks headed down and John Byrne was allowed too much space. He placed his cross-shot accurately, and for a few

minutes Rangers looked a good side.

Les Sealey saved the Town with the best goal-keeping of the day to claw out a header by Byrne and slowly Rangers lost their brief edge.

Their league position is not too healthy, and they got nervous as they tried to protect their slender lead.

The Town re-asserted their grip, without being able to put more than one finishing touch on a pitch where the extra bounce and pace of the ball introduced problems.

The equaliser came in the 62nd minute when the energetic David Preece was chopped down in midfield by Alan McDonald. Preece, battered, grazed and perhaps burned by the Omniturf friction, sent a deep free kick from left to right, Harford rose above everyone to head towards goal, and with the ball apparently on its way into the net Newell's quickness completed the strike.

Barron was left in doubt as to whether to go for the ball or to cover Newell's chance of deflecting it, and Newell got the decisive touch for his third goal in five appearances.

The last 28 minutes were stalemate.

Rangers, beaten by the Town on the three previous encounters between the clubs on the Omniturf, seemed to consider a draw a good result.

They were not prepared to take any risks to go for the other two points and worked hard to stop the Town producing the flowing soccer that can take apart opposition.

When home teams settle for that even their own friends notice, and long before the final whistle Rangers' fans were streaming away from the ground.

Match details

QPR 1 LUTON TOWN 1
HALF-TIME: 1-0

TOWN: Sealey; Johnson, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Nicholas, Preece; Newell, Harford, North. Sub: Breacker, not needed.

QPR: Barron; Neill, McDonald, Wicks, Dawes; Allen, Fenwick, Fillery, Fereday; Bannister, Byrne. Sub: Walker, not needed.

THE GOALS: John Byrne for Rangers, 35th minute, shot after Steven Wicks headed down a free kick; Mike Newell for the Town, 62nd minute, close-range final touch after Mick Harford headed David Preece's free kick towards the far corner.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved and five wide; Rangers six saved and three wide. Corners: 9-5 to Rangers.

ATTENDANCE: 16,252, above average for Loftus Road, boosted by a good following from Luton, on a day when London had no other First Division match because of the freeze-up.

REFEREE: Jim Ashworth, Leicester — kept too busy giving free kicks in a game that rarely flowed smoothly.

BOOKED: Steve Foster, his fifth caution of the season, for his third foul of the day on speedy Wayne Fereday.

ENTERTAINMENT: Too poor to give a real boost to the synthetic pitch supporters, on a surface which is obviously nothing like as good as the one at Kenilworth Road.