



● TOP HATTER: Mick Harford airborne for the winner against Sheffield Wednesday.

Football League, Division One

CLASSIC GOAL EARNS JUSTICE

VISITORS who had done their homework well got close to smothering the entertainment at Kenilworth Road before Luton Town achieved the victory that took their points haul past the half-century.

Sheffield Wednesday never looked like winning, but it needed a special goal by Mick Harford to see them off.

The visitors changed tactics and formation to try to stop the Town playing their normal flowing football, and so nearly succeeded that manager Howard Wilkinson said afterwards that he thought his men deserved a draw.

DESERVED BETTER

Perhaps that was all they really wanted, but justice was done by the result. The customers, however, deserved better

from the visiting team than its attempt to avoid a hammering.

Wilkinson moved full-back Mel Sterland into midfield in an attempt to quieten Peter Nicholas. Fortunately for the Town he failed, and I made Nicholas the man of the match.

We have become accustomed to his reliable tackling, but against Wednesday his passing — and the expert eye to see the right ball to play — was also spot on so consistently that Wednesday were always second best.

The Hillsborough Pressbox contingent stared in disbelief when Wednesday lined up with three attackers, instead of their usual two.

It turned out that Glynn Snodin and Brian Marwood were not so much attacking wingers as defensive front men, whose main job was to stop Mitchell Thomas and Rob Johnson breaking down the flanks.

The plan worked to some extent, but with the Town winning possession so well it was unable to cope completely. And with David Preece sparkling on the left the Town looked the more inventive and enterprising outfit.

TWO BOOKED

But on a bitterly cold day neither forward line hit top form. Wednesday's tackling was heavy enough to earn bookings for central defenders Paul Hart and Peter Shirliff, and it was impossible to forget the influence Brian Stein might have had on such a day.

Yet Harford, Mike Newell and Marc North were always more threatening than the lonely Gary Thompson at the other end. He got no change out of Steve Foster and Mal Donaghy and the only time the Town goal was ever threatened was when Les Sealey had to beat out a free kick by Snodin.

Otherwise Marwood's and Snodin's occasional speedy bursts offered no more than false hope for the visitors.

And at least the Town did not fall into the trap of forgetting their usual method of trying to make progress. Wednesday threw up a deep wall of frustration, and it would have been only too easy for the Town to become ragged and over-anxious to beat it.

PLAYERS' INQUEST

The Wednesday players held a self-analysis hour-long inquest in the dressing room. They were, said their manager, concerned because they had not played well and had seen a result nicked on a day when they felt they were worth a draw.

Neither goalkeeper, he said, had been overworked. That ignored the fact that the only time Wednesday got anywhere near to putting on pressure was a five-minute spell early in the first half when they won three corners without making anything of them.

At least the Town put in more attempts at goal.

Harford's winner was a classic centre-forward's score, rising high above two opponents to thump a header from ten yards into the net from a right wing corner by David Preece.

Before that Preece had seen a shot saved after Ricky Hill went round Mark Smith and passed back, and Newell had netted from Thomas's good pass as the flag waved for offside.

Wednesday also had a goal disallowed, when Gary Megson bundled in ball and goalkeeper in a first-half scramble, and there were no arguments when the verdict was a foul on Sealey.

Mr Wilkinson may, in a strange contradictory way, have felt more satisfied if his goalkeeper had not played so well.

SAVE OF THE DAY

Late in the first half Nicholas's shrewd short pass gave Newell sight of goal, and his booming drive was blocked by Martin Hodge.

Towards the end Newell unleashed a 25-yarder that forced Hodge to dive full length for the best save of the day.

Town boss David Pleat conceded that the visitors had been more in the game after half-time, and that their powers and physical strength had kept things tight.

But Luton fans, he said, could have watched it all in a relaxed frame of mind because Wednesday failed to create clear-cut chances.

My feeling was that they were so busy stopping the Town they didn't have anything in hand to be very positive.

Saturday's details

LUTON TOWN 1 SHEFFIELD WED 0

HALF-TIME: 1-0

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

WEDNESDAY: Hodge; Morris, Hart, Shirliff, Smith; Sterland, Megson, Shelton (Shutt, 74 mins); Marwood, Thompson, Snodin.

THE GOAL: Mick Harford, his 18th of the season, with a crashing header from a corner by David Preece.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved, five wide, one netted and disallowed for offside; Wednesday three saved, four wide, one netted and disallowed for a foul on the goalkeeper. Corners: 8-6 to the Town.

REFEREE: David Axcell, Southend — firm and fair throughout, and first-half bookings for Hart and Shirliff stopped Wednesday's tough defence overdoing it.

ATTENDANCE: 10,206, heartening on a day when sub-zero temperatures and rugby internationals on TV must have made firesides more attractive than usual on a Saturday afternoon.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not vintage Luton Town, mainly because the opposition was more concerned with closing it down than with winning.