

Weary men are run off their feet

THERE was an air of frustrated bewilderment in the Luton Town camp after lowly Oxford United became only the second visiting team to win a First Division match at Kenilworth Road this season.

The loyal fans turned up to pay tribute to a Town side which had given them so much hope in the FA Cup run, only to follow that success with a rare flop.

Oxford got the win they deserved, and no-one was able to explain why so many Town players were off form on the same day.

Often one or two below par can be carried through by their colleagues, but this time the majority were off colour. They did not seem to have the legs to compete with the busy visitors.

In view of some of the tremendous cup performances, I for one don't begrudge the occasional lapse, particularly when it comes in the sixth game in 16 days.

"We just couldn't pass the ball," said skipper Steve Foster, who shared the general disappointment at being unable to hit decent form.

Oxford's Trevor Hebbard suggested that it was a case of his side, desperate for points to stave off relegation threats, wanting to win more than the Town.

Manager David Pleat admitted that Oxford were brighter and deserved the points.

He had some doubts about the legality of John Aldridge's penalty kick equaliser — the Oxford man feinted in his run-up to deceive Les Sealey before making contact with the ball.

Both managers also had doubts about referee Colin Downey, although his poor performance had less effect on the result than the Town's out-of-sorts showing.

Oxford were first to complain, in the 15th minute, when Gary Briggs was ad-

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

judged to have fouled Mick Harford on the edge of the box.

David Preece, one of the few Town men to play well, curled in a clever kick to give the Town a lead that could have been the springboard for success.

Oxford had other ideas. Manager Maurice Evans had warned them before kick-off that having won a place in the Milk Cup final at Wembley was not the end of the season.

Their First Division status was still endangered, Norwich and Sunderland had both been relegated a year ago after contesting the Milk Cup final, and no man's place in the team was safe.

Oxford men dare not take it easy in league games for fear of being replaced by players anxious to get into the team in time for Wembley.

They harried and hustled, ran harder than the Town, and constructed most of the good moves in a game that reached few heights of skill.

Briggs and skipper Malcolm Shotton kept Harford and Mike Newell quiet, Ricky Hill was all but snuffed out in his attempts to get forward and Mitchell Thomas and Tim Breacker were too busy trying to defend to break forward very often.

Mal Donaghy tried hard to patch things up, but Peter Nicholas was unable to make his normal telling contribution to the defensive work.

Mark Stein, pitched into a side which has been unable to settle into a regular formation through injuries, threatened to be a

good understudy for his brother but was given too much of a hard time by the quick-tacklers of Oxford.

The half-time lead was a bonus for the Town, because Jeremy Charles was winning plenty in the air when Oxford attacked, and Peter Rhoades-Brown got in some incisive runs down their left.

One header by Charles led to Thomas clearing off the line from Shotton, and another needed a good save by the alert Sealey, who also did well to fling himself at a drive by Hebbard.

But two goals in 14 minutes early in the second half left us all with sure knowledge that this was going to be one of those days.

The first stemmed from another header by Charles, from a cross by Rhoades-Brown. The defence was in a tangle when Aldridge was brought down by Nicholas. He got up to trick Sealey from the penalty spot for his 24th goal of the season.

I had no complaints about Aldridge's method of deceiving Sealey, even though the goalkeeper was one of the few Town men who did not deserve to be on the losing side.

Penalties are meant to bring goals, and so long as all referees allow Aldridge's kind of cleverness to flourish, fair enough.

In the 62nd minute, and with the Town rarely looking sweet-running in attack, Oxford broke at speed to snatch the winner. Once more it was the Rhoades-Brown/Charles combination which was decisive.

The Welsh son of a famous footballing family took a pass from the winger

ten or 15 yards inside the Town half, and bundled his way past Donaghy to shoot past Sealey's left hand.

Thomas almost gave Oxford a third goal with a terrible back pass, but atoned by racing back to clear off the line after Ray Houghton had gone past Sealey.

Foster had to make another desperate clearance to stop Houghton late on, and then led the Town in a late charge which might have brought an undeserved equaliser.

The skipper pushed forward, was downed on the edge of the penalty area and in injury time we had visions of another Preece free kick hitting the net.

But canny Oxford refused to retreat ten yards, despite a booking for Neil Slatter. Mr Downey failed to apply the law, and with

the need to lift the ball early in its flight the free kick was sent into the crowd.

Like much of what had gone before, it proved that footballers, like the rest of us, can sometimes have one of those days at work when nothing will go right.

Having watched ten home games in succession without defeat, perhaps it does no great harm to suffer the occasional reverse to remind us all of the excellence that Luton Town can produce.

The team that gave so much pleasure destroying Arsenal in the Cup has not turned into a load of rubbish in the same month through one poor performance.

But we will hope to see something a lot better on Saturday for the challenge Everton will present.

Match details

LUTON TOWN 1 OXFORD UTD 2

HALF-TIME: 1-0

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Nicholas, Preece; Mark Stein (North, 72 mins), Harford, Newell.

OXFORD: Judge; Trewick, Briggs, Shotton, Slatter; Houghton, Phillips, Hebbard; Aldridge, Charles (Thomas, 65 mins), Rhoades-Brown.

THE GOALS: David Preece for the Town, curling 20-yard free kick in the 15th minute; John Aldridge penalty for Oxford, 48 mins, after Peter Nicholas fouled him; Jeremy Charles for Oxford, 62 minutes, holding off Mal Donaghy to capitalise on Rhoades-Brown's inside pass.

OTHER STRIKES: Town seven saved and six wide; Oxford eight saved and five wide. Corners: 5-3 to Oxford.

REFEREE: Colin Downey — like many of the Town players had one of those days when little would go right.

ATTENDANCE: 10,633, just below this season's Kenilworth Road average.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very poor for Town fans, with Oxford showing a greater appetite for the ball, and deserving to win.

BOOKED: Les Phillips and Neil Slatter of Oxford; Mike Newell and Mick Harford of the Town.