

Striking skill settles it

WITH the England manager watching, a late goal of rare quality by Mick Harford completed a Luton Town victory at St Andrew's against a team struggling to avoid relegation.

Birmingham City seem destined to go back to the Second Division after only one season in the First, and how they must have wished they could have held on to Harford 18 months ago.

At £250,000, he looks a steal when he hits the form that finished off a side that fought hard for equality throughout the second half.

On a tricky sandy pitch,

**Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards**

and in weather which ranged from bright sunshine to wind-driven snow, the Town showed occasional touches of the form that can beat better sides than Birmingham.

Yet the underdogs, in process of being reorganised by John Bond, battled back into contention after Harford's first goal, early in the second half, and only two good saves by Les Sealey kept them out.

David Seaman, Birmingham's outstanding player, was even more heroic in the other goal, preventing the Town from wrapping it up in the first half.

The contest was one in which each side had periods of domination, and Harford's second goal was probably cruel on Birmingham — they were caught stretched after valiant attempts to equalise, and were punished by a brilliant build-up and finish.

QUALITY

But it pointed up the crucial difference between a team of good triers and one with an extra touch of quality.

Both sides looked more effective down their left flanks, with David Preece threatening major problems for Birmingham in the first half.

Ricky Hill did well going forward on the right, and was unlucky with a diving header which Seaman pushed round the post in the tenth minute.

That came from a smooth passing movement starting with Mal Donaghy and continued by Preece, Harford, Mitchell Thomas and Preece again with the final cross.

Peter Nicholas led the ball-winning in midfield, and the Town might have been two or three ahead by the interval.

Harford went in among flying boots for a brave

header which was blocked, then saw two thundering drives kept out by the goalkeeper. From one save Mike Newell hit the bar, but was given offside.

Steve Foster blocked most of Birmingham's first half attempts to go down the middle, and when the pressure increased after the interval Donaghy emerged as man of the match.

He covered colleagues, timed challenges perfectly, and still chose the right moments to move forward to cause problems at the other end.

GOAL

Rob Johnson, at right back, came under heavier pressure in the second half but stood it well, and one of his forward runs led to the first goal.

He was halted by a foul near the half-way line. Foster played the free kick high towards the far side of the penalty area, Donaghy arrived with perfect timing to head the ball across goal and Harford coolly avoided Billy Garton's attempted challenge and placed his shot into the far corner from about ten yards.

Birmingham, desperate for points, responded to the 48th-minute reverse with great determination.

Left-back Julian Dicks, 18, moved up into midfield and played some delightful passes, particularly with cross-field balls which threatened to pull the Town's midfield out of shape.

The home side's passing improved, and the Town had to settle for a tradi-

tional away team style. Foster gathered men around him to fend off the increasing tempo of Birmingham attacking, with the Town rarely able to move forward as well as they had done before the interval.

Referee Ken Breen made decisions which upset both teams in turn. Foster and Andy Kennedy collided on the edge of the penalty area to give Birmingham a chance to equalise.

WIDE

The free kick looked harsh from the pressbox, but when the ball was touched sideways Martin Kuhl shot wide.

Wayne Clarke almost got through when he charged down a clearance by Foster, but Sealey sprang forward to beat the attacker to the ball.

A few minutes later the goalkeeper flung himself full-length to push a 20-yard low drive by Des Bremner round the post, and with five minutes to go made an even better save.

A good passing move by Birmingham ended with Robert Hopkins cracking in a drive which seemed to have caught Sealey a yard or two off his line.

I thought it would be the equaliser, and still wonder how Sealey managed to take off and stay in the air long enough to flick the ball over the bar. I think the ball was past him by the time he made contact, back arched like a bow under pressure.

CAUGHT

Birmingham piled men forward for the final few minutes, and were caught out as the game moved into injury time.

Newell collected a half-

clearance from the Town's overworked defence, made ground past the half-way line and pushed the ball into space down the right wing.

Tim Breacker, who had worked with a will throughout a game that was always difficult for midfielders, found the energy to chase the pass, and his cross was perfect.

Harford's speed had left opponents behind, and as Breacker dropped the cross into the goalmouth the centre-forward rose to head so accurately that even the excellent Seaman had no chance as the ball went past his right hand.

It was the sort of skill that Bobby Robson appreciated, even if he is determined not to be pushed into deep discussion about his World Cup plans.

Match details

**BIRMINGHAM CITY 0
LUTON TOWN 2**

HALF-TIME: 0-0

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

BIRMINGHAM: Seaman; Ranson, Garton, Wright, Dicks; Hopkins, Bremner, Kuhl, Handysides; Kennedy, Clarke. Sub: Smalley, not used.

THE GOALS: Mick Harford twice — low shot, 48 minutes, and perfectly-placed header 27 seconds into injury time.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved and five wide; Birmingham five saved and five wide. Corners: 10-2 to Birmingham.

REFEREE: Ken Breen, Lancashire — in his first season in the league, was always impartial and sometimes puzzled both sides.

ATTENDANCE: 8,836, a sad Sunday sight in a ground holding 45,000.

ENTERTAINMENT: Patchy, with a sandy and bumpy pitch helping neither side, but plenty of excitement in the second half when Birmingham threatened to get an equaliser.



● **KILLER:** Mick Harford heads the second goal in injury time.