

Equaliser worth waiting for

RELIEF AT A late strike which saved the Town a point against Spurs almost swamped the realisation that they should have had three points, not one.

The visitors were second best in every department bar defending in depth, but were let off the hook because the Town could not find the finish to match their approach work.

With England boss Bobby Robson watching, Mick Harford and Mike Newell both wasted opportunities which would have seen off the Spurs by half-time, despite the goal they pinched on the break in the 18th minute.

Brian Stein returned to First Division action for the first time in two months following a knee operation. Not surprisingly he had a quiet game, but manager David Pleat was delighted with his performance.

"It was a massive gamble to put him in only six weeks after his operation, and my only instruction to him was to go out and enjoy the game," he said.

As a football contest it was fair entertainment, spoiled on-

Report by Brian Swain

ly for Town fans by the knowledge that the first-ever league double over Spurs was there for the taking.

If the finishing was not ruthless enough, there was at least the consolation of seeing the team sticking to the traditional Luton style, even when time threatened to count them out.

The danger as the game went into its last quarter was that the Town would become over-anxious in chasing the equaliser and be caught on the break, and Clive Allen had already shown that he could be devastating if given half a chance.

His expertise snatched the lead against the run of play with a goal taken brilliantly, but from a chance provided by poor defensive work.

A long punt by Ray Clemence bounced once past Peter Nicholas, Chris Waddle tried to get a nudge-on and may have made slight contact, and the Town defence stood almost motionless hoping for an offside flag.

Allen, about 25 yards from goal, saw Les Sealey off his line and dipped a superb shot over him.

That was the Spurs' first shot on target. At the other end Steve Foster had seen a flick saved at full length, had headed wide, and had seen Stein shoot wide when the hard-

pressed defence failed to clear.

The equaliser should have arrived in the 25th minute when swift passing by Foster and Stein saw Harford go through on his own. Gary Mabbutt, playing for his England place as deputy for suspended Graham Roberts, was left trailing for once, but Harford tried to place his shot from the edge of the box and Clemence made the save look easy.

It was the sort of opening the Town striker would convert 99 times out of 100.

His contest with Mabbutt was one of the highlights of the afternoon, and several others produced a kind of stalemate.

The first half was not helped by ten offside, shared equally, as defenders and midfield men condensed space.

Gary Stevens and Ricky Hill just about cancelled each other out, and if Rob Johnson and Mitchell Thomas did not reach attacking positions as often as they usually do, they did vital work in preventing John Chiedozie and Tony Galvin getting through down the flanks from midfield.

Waddle, so excellent as an attacker in the Ricky Hill match a few days previously, played a withdrawn midfield role to compensate for the absences of Glenn Hoddle and Ossie Ardiles.

ISOLATED

That left Allen and 19-goal Mark Falco isolated in attack, particularly in the latter stages when Spurs were forced to put

nine men into defensive positions.

Allen's goal apart, Foster and Mal Donaghy were rarely in much trouble, but the Town's midfield had to work hard in limited space to find gaps at the other end.

Hill, Nicholas and David Preece all kept going well enough, and if only one earlier goal had been scored the game would probably have opened up enough to make it a cracker.

Spurs were lucky to retain their lead to the interval, with Clemence under so much pressure that he even forgot the steps rule, 1985 version.

He got away with it, with the indirect free kick being worked to Harford whose drive hit the wall.

There was a shock at the other end when Mabbutt moved forward for a corner, stayed upfield, and drifted into space to head a cross by Galvin into the terracing.

But down at the Oak Road end Harford headed a centre by Thomas over the bar, and two half-chances went astray in the final minute of the half.

Hill, Donaghy and Harford created the first, with Newell firing wide on the turn. Then a cross by Preece bounced through to the far post, and

Newell, forced to take that one quickly as well, was off target again.

LET-OFF

The biggest let-off came three minutes into the second half when a sweeping move down the left by Hill, Preece and Thomas ended with Spurs glad to concede a corner.

They failed to clear decisively, Nicholas knocked the ball back into the goalmouth and Harford's header was brilliantly taken. Clemence was helpless, but the ball hit the post, and the goalkeeper made a marvellous spreading save when Newell tried to shoot home the rebound.

Lesser teams than the Town would have degenerated into frantic passion and endeavour after the disappointment, and Spurs would doubtless have welcomed it.

They settled for defiant defence and a hope that something would turn up on the break.

The Town pressed forward in numbers, but thankfully persisted in trying to make progress through good passing.

Johnson, whose career resurrection has been a delight for a man who might have been finished by two terrible injuries, kept working down

the right flank, and Thomas did the same on the other side.

For a team without recognised wingers, the Town often work wonders with their ability to give the attack width, and it was that skill which produced the equaliser.

INVITING

Nicholas delivered an inviting pass for Johnson to run into space down the right wing. The centre was equally good, and Newell's diving header was perfection.

The disappointment of earlier misses vanished in the roar of acclaim that greeted his sixth goal for the Town, and his 25th of the season.

The feeling was one of relief that some kind of justice had been done with only two minutes to go.

A point was the least the Town deserved for their efforts. It was a lot more than Spurs should have had on the run of play. Their Kenilworth Road record must have a charmed existence, because a year ago they nicked a draw with two equalisers in the last five minutes.

This was the sixth successive visit in which they have avoided defeat, since a goal by George Cummins gave the Town a victory in 1959.

Match details

LUTON TOWN 1 SPURS 1 85/86
HALF-TIME 0-1

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

SPURS: Clemence; Paul Allen, Miller, Mabbutt, Hughton; Chiedozie, Waddle, Stevens, Galvin; Falco, Clive Allen. Sub: Bowen, not needed.

THE GOALS: Clive Allen for Spurs, 18 minutes, 25-yard dipper with the Town caught stranded by Clemence's punt; Mike Newell for the Town, 88 minutes, diving header from Rob Johnson's right-wing cross.

OTHER STRIKES: Town eight saved, seven wide, and Harford header hit the post; Spurs four saved and five wide. Corners: 7-5 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 13,141, third highest of the season.

REFEREE: Robert Hamer, Bristol — made a few mistakes, including the award of a goal kick when Johnson's tackle to stop Clive Allen conceded a corner, but no-one had major complaints about his handling of a good competitive contest.

ENTERTAINMENT: Pretty good, despite the injustice of the result, and the match was played in good spirit throughout, with no sign of malice from either side.



● **WELCOME BACK:** Brian Stein on his return to the First Division after his knee operation. "He was magnificent," said manager David Pleat.