

FRUSTRATED BY BRILLIANT GOALKEEPER

THE CHANGING face of football at Luton Town this year threw up an amazing sight and sound at Kenilworth Road as the game against Newcastle ended.

A visiting player was cheered off the pitch, given the sort of sporting appreciation we haven't heard for a long time for one of the other side.

Goalkeeper Martin Thomas, who enjoyed an inspired afternoon with saves that recalled Gordon Banks at his international best, deserved his hero's accolade.

It was because of him that a very promising Luton Town performance failed to collect all three points.

It was not so much a case of the Town dropping two points as of one man saving them.

Not for many years has Kenilworth Road seen such a virtuoso performance — the last I remember was by Bob Wardle of Shrewsbury on a day when Bob Hatton and Co had their hearts broken in another 0-0 home draw.

This time it was Mike Newell and Brian Stein who suffered most.

Each could have had a hat-trick. The attacking was sharp and skilful, the finishing crisp, and Thomas was brilliant.

Les Sealey, almost a spectator as the Town piled on the pressure, gave his verdict from afar. After one of Thomas's many fine saves the Luton goalkeeper flung himself on the ground, arms and legs pointed skywards in a mixture of frustration and appreciation.

Manager John Moore was not over-generous. "The goalkeeper did what he had to do, and good luck to the lad," was his comment.

The best save of the lot came in the first half, when the Town threatened to run up a cricket score.

A left wing cross by Stein fizzed across the face of the goal, Newell met it first time with power and accuracy and the goalkeeper who had been covering the cross a second before somehow got down to save near the foot of the post.

The TV re-runs of the Banks save from Pele in Mexico sprang to mind.

Perhaps a lot of visiting

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goalkeepers will be given the chance to shine at Luton this season. No-one else on the Newcastle side could, because they were out-passed, out-run and out-smarted for long periods.

Peter Beardsley, the obvious danger man, was almost anonymous. The Town's dominance forced him to lie deep, and the only time he showed England class and laid on a chance for Paul Gascoigne, Rob Johnson cleared off the line.

That shot, just before the interval, was the last of only three Newcastle managed on target in the whole 90 minutes.

The first two came in an early burst, with Sealey doing well to save a deflected shot by Beardsley, and then making another good save from John Anderson after the corner.

From then on it was Thomas v Luton.

One of the encouraging features was that the Town showed a variety of methods in creating openings.

Johnson overlapping down the left found Robert Wilson on the right and from his headed pass Newell brought Thomas to a full-length save.

Stein left David McCreery turned all ways before shooting narrowly wide. Meka Nwajiobi helped to keep on the pressure, and twice within a minute Hill gave Stein sight of goal, with Thomas flinging himself into saves each time.

An overhead kick by Nwajiobi was flipped over the bar, a header by Foster from the corner was pushed away, and from that Newell's Maradona touch put the ball in the net. Referee Ray Lewis and his linesman both saw that it was a little too handy to be true.

Nwajiobi did manage to beat Thomas twice with crisp shots, but on each occasion the off-side whistle had sounded.

The Town were able to push forward with little hindrance from a Newcastle midfield that

could not cope with the Town's ball-winners.

It should have been a massacre, and it was a delight to see the Town so superior.

It was also good to see that chances were not so much wasted as frustrated by Thomas's excellence.

Shots and headers were on target often enough to ensure goals on any normal afternoon.

And while the new manager is seeking more shooting from midfield positions, it is also noticeable that Luton Town's style has not been radically altered by summer upheavals.

The absence of Mick Harford was not a major factor in Newcastle's shut-out, and if the average of a goal a game from the first three matches is disappointing on paper, we can be sure that Saturday's form will improve it dramatically.

Newcastle were all but swamped by the kind of incisive passing and running we have got used to at Kenilworth Road. The standards dropped slightly in the second half as Thomas frustrated all the best scoring efforts.

He got the lucky break he deserved when Peter Nicholas went down the right and left him stranded by the pulled backpass: Wilson, under pressure and with little time, side-footed his shot narrowly wide of the post.

A 1-0 win would have been deserved, yet on the day I joined the general admiration for Thomas's excellence. I want to see Luton Town win, but if they don't it's nice to know that it was something very special that foiled them.

Newcastle manager Willie McFaul, once a top goalkeeper himself, admitted the obvious — "We didn't start playing football until the last five or six minutes, and by then we could have been five down."

Match details

LUTON TOWN 0 NEWCASTLE UTD 0

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Johnson; Wilson, Nicholas, Hill; Stein, Newell, Nwajiobi. Sub: M. North, not used.

NEWCASTLE: Thomas; Bailey, Anderson, Roeder, McDonald; Gascoigne, Bogie, McCreery, Wharton; Beardsley, Whitehurst. Sub: Stewart, not used.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town 12 saved, six wide, two netted after offside was given and one hand-made by Mike Newell but spotted by the ref; Newcastle three saved and one wide. Corners: 14-4 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 9,254, a drop of 1,065 on Newcastle's last visit. Fifteen Geordies tried and failed to beat the away fan ban.

REFEREE: Ray Lewis, Great Bookham — was able to enjoy the game without being asked to work hard.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very good, with disappointment at dropping two home points partly balanced by the fact that Newcastle goalkeeper Martin Thomas turned in a marvellous display. He alone saved his side when they should have lost about 12-1.

APPRECIATION: The Geordies had no-one to cheer them on, but Thomas was accorded an ovation at the end.