

Extra gear is not needed

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN 1 CHARLTON ATH 0 HALF-TIME: 1-0

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Johnson, Foster, Donaghy, Grimes; Wilson, Brian Stein, Nicholas, McDonough; Mark Stein, Newell. Sub: Marc North, not needed.

CHARLTON ATHLETIC: Johns; Humphrey, Thompson, Shirliff, Reid; Peake (Walsh, 62 mins), Shipley, Aizlewood, Stuart; Lee, Pearson.

THE GOAL: Mark Stein, 20 minutes, low angled drive from brother Brian's pass for his fourth goal in four games.

OTHER STRIKES: Town eight saved, four wide; Charlton six saved and three wide. Corners: 8-4 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 9,373, day's lowest in the First Division (and below two in the Second).

REFEREE: Arthur Robinson, Manchester; always in firm control.

ENTERTAINMENT: Well short of top quality. The Town need better opposition to draw out better performances.

MANAGER John Moore thought Luton Town were lucky to get the victory which maintained their unbeaten home record at the expense Charlton Athletic.

His opposite number, Lennie Lawrence, saw it differently: "If we had got a goal to equalise Luton would have stepped up a gear."

If he is right, the fans might have cheered a Charlton goal, but they rarely looked like getting it.

The Town had no need to produce their best form to win, and my disappointment was that they did not add a stylish flourish to embellish the job.

Perhaps they are getting so expert that they can pace themselves to perfection, and certainly the ability to win without playing to peak potential is the hallmark of good professional teams.

SLIDING

Charlton, sliding desperately towards the relegation zone in their first season back at the top level for 29 years, looked nondescript.

Yet they had the man of the match in skipper Mark Aislewood. The former Town full-back was a revelation in midfield, and rightly won the sponsors' man of the match award.

He tried hard to inspire a limited team, but with Steve Foster snuffing out lanky striker John Pearson Les Sealey had an easy afternoon.

"We were so poor I could have played in goal for Luton in the second half," said Lawrence.

"The score flattered us. Luton won without ever having to produce their best form, and whether you put that down to us or to their own deficiencies is academic.

REPORTS BY BRIAN SWAIN ACTION PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIGEL WIGGLESWORTH

"I said to the lads before the start that whatever happens don't concede a goal in the first 20 minutes. They carried out my instructions to the letter!"

His joke referred to the fact that the game had dragged into the 21st minute when it was given the lift it needed.

Brian Stein, playing a deep-lying role, nutmegged John Humphrey and threaded a clever short pass into the path of his younger brother.

Mark Stein's finishing matched the sharpness of the pass, and Nicky Johns had no chance with the drive into the corner of net.

It was a rare highlight in a game that will be remembered for the result rather than for the level of skills and entertainment.

Charlton were dogged and prepared to struggle manfully to avoid a pasting, and even without the midfield variety that Ricky Hill and David Preece can provide the Town were still worth the victory.

Tim Breacker, suspect to hard-running flank play at Hillsborough the previous week, was dropped for the first time in his Luton career, and manager Moore made two changes as a result.

Rob Johnson switched to right back, Ashley Grimes went to the other flank, and Robert Wilson was recalled into midfield.

Defensively, the combination of Peter Nicholas and Darren McDonough worked admirably, but home fans wanted more creativity going forward.

Wilson has the misfortune to be compared to Hill, but the jeers from the main stand hardly helped him in his efforts to get into the game in an attacking role.

Charlton lacked the inven-

tiveness to put the Town's defence under any real pressure, and their fifth consecutive league defeat underlines the problems a lack of confidence can cause.

By contrast the Town almost strolled through the 90 minutes. And before we moan too loudly about the steady level of the performance, we might remember that not so long ago that was exactly what we demanded.

Perhaps it is a measure of the club's progress that we want ever-higher standards.

We saw what can be achieved against Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, and felt deflated when it couldn't be repeated against Charlton.

It didn't need to be. "It was nice to see us have so much possession, particularly in the first half," said Lawrence. "But it counts for nothing unless you do the business in the two penalty areas. We couldn't punch our way out of a paper bag."

The only time the Town looked in real danger was when Pearson bulleted a header towards the top corner from Aizlewood's free kick in the 36th minute. McDonough headed off the line.

TRYING

Mark Stuart was the only man to show any sign of trying to get round the back of the Town defence, but nothing came of his efforts.

"We flattered to deceive," said Lawrence, whose Pressroom performance was far wittier and sharper than his team's had been on the pitch.

Mr Moore confessed that he would love to see the Liverpool and Forest form reproduced in every game, but gave credit to Charlton for being as difficult to beat as he had forecast.

This was one of those games when the team had to work to achieve the result. He made the point that the Town had played better when they lost at Old Trafford than they did when they beat Charlton.

And he promised that the victory would not mask his appreciation of the faults he had seen.

On the positive side, Mark Stein is looking stronger as he gains in experience, and is no longer an easy touch for big defenders.

Brian Stein is still a will o' the wisp in approach, and deserved a goal for his low shot which Johns pushed round the post after a strong run from deep by Mal Donaghy.

The defender almost scored himself, but was foiled by the goalkeeper's brave smothering dive.

Earlier Donaghy had drifted in for a header from a corner which forced Johns to go down quickly to save, while Sealey's quiet afternoon ended in pain and worry when he was injured in the last minute.

He was carried off at the final whistle, bearing the evidence of his bravery in clearing as Pearson's studs bore into the top of his foot.

When players are willing to give blood to keep Luton Town up with the elite in the First Division there can't be too much wrong.