

DEFIANT DEFENCE IS NOT ENOUGH

LUTON Town manager John Moore was able to duck out of the post-match Press conference at Highbury without causing offence.

The day was Arsenal's, and rightly so, after they had clinched the victory that ensured they stayed top of the First Division on their 100th birthday tomorrow.

They were made to work hard for the points, but the Town had little to offer beyond brave defence, and Mr Moore would not have liked some of the questions reporters wanted to ask.

The major one was on the Town's approach to a difficult assignment.

"Why so negative? — That wasn't the Luton Town I liked watching," was one of the comments from a Fleet Street man who had not seen the Town in an away game this season.

Answers had to become excuses to some degree. The Town had been concentrating hard on defence — and for 70 minutes the policy looked as though it might just snatch a point from a goalless draw.

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which is as good as any other visiting team has achieved at Highbury this season.

Steve Foster was put out of the match by flu, and eventually was sorely missed, despite the best efforts of Stacey North, the astonishing covering and workrate of Mal Donaghy, and the fierce competitiveness of Peter Nicholas.

And three goals in the last 20 minutes gave a result that flattered Arsenal a little, even though they deserved to win to maintain their unbeaten home record.

Sadly the defence which had been a bunch of scrooges in giving nothing away suffered a late change as dramatic as the one Marley's Ghost inspired.

And the narrow gap between success and failure was underlined by Arsenal's goals.

FAILED

The first game when the Town defence failed to attack the ball from a cross, the second was from a corner, given when the award might well have been a free kick to the Town for a push on goal-keeper Les Sealey. The third was the result of a misunderstanding between Donaghy and North, and a fumble by Sealey.

Yet even if the Town had held the Arsenal to a single goal, there was rarely any sign that they would unlock a defence which has conceded only three goals in its nine home games so far.

I cannot remember the last time the Town played 90 minutes without getting a single scoring attempt on target.

The irony of it all was that Darron McDonough had the clearest chance of the first half, but stabbed the ball wide from close range after Brian Stein's clever dummy had made the opening from Tim Breacker's cross.

A Town victory would have done more for their loyal following than for football at large. The midfield had to use so much energy on defensive duties that it had little chance to service the attack.

Mike Newell and the Stein

brothers had to drop deeper and deeper in the hope of picking up a clearance.

I hoped that Arsenal might become frustrated at the failure to break through, and lose their shape, but George Graham's team is too good for that after a confidence-building run of success.

The Arsenal boss had no complaints about the Town's performance or attitude. He was just pleased that Arsenal stuck to their game with the certain knowledge that they could not be losers on the day.

"It needed a lot of patience," he admitted. "But there was a lot in that game that reminded me of some of the matches when we did the double in 1971."

Graham played in that side, in a team that was jeered on opposing grounds as boring. So if we moan about the Town's determination to give nothing away this season, we should bear in mind that in Arsenal's 1971 championship season they took the title by conceding only 29 goals in 42 First Division matches. They scored 71.

Some of Arsenal's games in that season, said Graham, were as scrappy as the one we had just seen.

There is no doubt that Foster's leadership was missed, particularly when Niall Quinn launched his 6ft 4ins frame to head Arsenal into the lead with 20 minutes to go.

The other absences are also illustrations of the problems any team faces when it cannot afford a huge First Division squad.

Liverpool and Everton slot replacements in from a spare pool of talent. Arsenal have a squad big enough to leave out men like Tommy Caton, Graham Rix and Stewart Robson. Even Charlie Nicholas was left on the sub's bench until the first goal was scored.

The Town's best eleven will give anyone a run for their money. So will their second best and third best on the good days.

But this wasn't one of them. And who can blame players for lack of experience?

At the start of the season,



● **BLOCKING:** Stacey North up against Niall Quinn.

when Mitchell Thomas left, we were promised he would be replaced by an England player. The deal, thought to be the intended purchase of Derek Statham, fell through, and as things have panned out perhaps it was not a great disaster.

Darron McDonough and Robert Wilson came into the squad as cover players, and have been pitched into difficult situations with varying degrees of success, but with an undoubted willingness to try to grab the chances to become established in the First Division.

At Highbury, McDonough, a central defender by trade, was again asked to work in midfield, on the right. Ashley Grimes, who came as a left back, took the left midfield slot.

The ball-winning was not too bad, but the distribution fell short of First Division demands, and yielding possession to Arsenal invited trouble.

But the 70 minutes of defence and hard work showed the team can live with the best in the land.

On the day, Arsenal's attack

always looked more lethal and promising than the Town's. The midfields would have been equal but for the fact that Steve Williams injected some individual flair and thought into the game.

He also had too much to say, which earned him a booking, but had the last word with the run that broke the deadlock.

He managed to take the ball round Nicholas, and drew defenders towards him as he approached the penalty area down the middle.

UNMARKED

Perry Groves, who has displaced Rix, was left unmarked on the left wing, and by the time defenders were alerted to that fact Groves had gathered the pass from Williams and delivered a perfect cross for Quinn to head home.

The marking might have been suspect, but it was still a goal to admire.

Arsenal had created and missed chances before then, and some of their play had been stereotyped, with Sealey

fielding a succession of crosses with reliable bravery.

He was put under pressure as he tried to clear a corner by Paul Davis and I thought he had been impeded. But another corner was awarded, and this time Quinn got in another powerful header.

It rebounded off the bar, and Tony Adams snapped up the chance from close range.

Two minutes from the end, a mix-up between Donaghy and North led to a goal that was down to defensive errors rather than attacking brilliance.

Donaghy was bringing the ball out of defence, having won yet another tackle, and played a short pass in front of