

FOREST TRIP GIVES A LIFT

FANS WHO felt so let down by the unbeaten home record tumbled on Boxing Day would scarcely have believed their eyes at the way Luton Town responded to the blow two days later.

Championship contenders Nottingham Forest, who had not lost at home for 11 months, needed an equaliser in injury time to stop the Town completing a double over them.

With Steve Foster and Mick Harford back, it looked a different and more professional Town side.

It was a day when they had to battle to prevent a dominant home team capitalising on a lot of possession, but Foster's return after a two-match absence was inspirational.

There had been a bit of heart-searching after the ethereal show against Watford, and the Nottingham crowd saw an altogether more determined Town team.

There was bite in the tackles, a resilience in defence and midfield, and a top quality strike rate with two goals snatched out of the very limited scoring chances.

On balance of play Forest should have won. But they were frustrated because every Town player produced the grit and defiance that had been missing against Watford.

Foster and Donaghy blocked most of the attempts to go down the middle, and if Rob Johnson and Tim Breacker were given problems by the wing play of Franz Carr, they failed to let it upset them.

His speed and control produced the day's classy moments. Running from heel to threatened to be the crucial character, yet for the most part sensible defending and timing of tackles meant that his final passes often went wrong.

Peter Nicholas regained his form, tanking through midfield and Robert Wilson, in for the injured Darren McDonough, had the best game I have seen from him.

NOTTINGHAM FOREST 2 LUTON TOWN 2

Much of his work had to be defensive, or lurking just in front of the hard-working rearguard to try to engineer attacks on the break. Like everyone else he buckled down to a difficult working role, and long before the end had helped to turn Forest into a very frustrated outfit.

Harford's return was scarcely believable. Barely a month after his fourth knee operation of the year, it was his first match of any sort. Mark Stein was the unlucky man to stand down as manager John Moore decided that the Nottingham task was one for experience.

Harford grabbed his chance with a performance that had you thinking he had never been away from league soccer for six months.

There was the old canny wandering to draw defenders out of position, and the lovely deft touch, particularly with flicked headers.

Mike Newell enjoyed teaming up with his old mate and looked a better player for it. Brian Stein played in his old spot, behind the front two, and with Ashley Grimes the other attacking midfielder also in form the Town had the look of a side which would be very hard to beat.

With Forest positive and looking for goals to avenge their defeat at Kenilworth Road, it set up a match for high excitement and entertainment.

Forest laid siege to the Town goal, Foster marshalled his troops splendidly, and when the last line was reached Les Sealey did everything that was asked of him.

The Town did their jobs so professionally that the last second equaliser, deserved though it was on run of play, led to an angry clash between the goalkeeper and Mark Stein for giving the ball away when it might have been kicked anywhere.

It was a brief flare-up, with Sealey angered by the fact that the defensive battle had been fought so valiantly for 90 minutes and could have produced victory.

There was also some anger about referee Neil Midgley of Stoke for the number of 50/50 decisions that went the home side's way.

And his booking of Harford, for a mistimed tackle on Ian Bowyer, was ludicrous.

But Mr Midgley did at least resist the pressure to give penalties — Forest and their fans became so desperate that three times there were huge shouts for handball in the area as Town bodies were flung in to blocking positions to keep out shots.

The woodwork also came to the Town's rescue in the ninth minute. Five minutes earlier Neil Webb had engineered a Forest counter-attack and headed into the net from David Campbell's cross.

It looked a cracking goal, but was ruled out for offside, and Webb had more disappointment when he took a pass from Nigel Clough and drove against the outside of a post.

But the Town, passing accurately and at speed on counter-attacks, stunned the big crowd by taking the lead in the tenth minute, from their only corner of the first half.

Grimes swung it in from the left, to the back of the penalty area where Harford had found space. He headed diagonally towards the far post and Brian Stein jumped into the gap to head his eighth goal of the season from close range.

It spurred Forest to great attacking urgency, and the Town to solid and sensible defence. Sealey saved a drive from Webb and dived low to clutch a header from Clough.

Stuart Pearce thought he had scored with a swerving free kick from 20 yards, but Sealey flew across goal to make a thrilling tip-over save, and in the last minute of the first half Webb burst clear but shot wide.

The pattern was unchanged after the interval, except that you could sense the increasing frustration around the ground among Forest players and fans alike.

the confidence surge Forest enjoyed from the goal.

Instead, after Mills had shot wide from another clear chance, the Town regained the lead with five minutes to go.

The build-up could not have been more basic: Sealey punted a long clearance down the middle. Newell beat Chris Fairclough for pace in the first instance, then for strength as the defender tried to tackle from the side, and drove in the goal that looked like being the match-winner.

It was have been a bit of a smash and grab pinch, but perhaps cruel justice was done in injury time.

My watched showed 91 minutes 40 seconds — and there had been two stoppages in the second half — when Bowyer lashed in the equaliser.

It was his first goal since he scored from similar range at Kenilworth Road, but this time it needed a little luck.

Mark Stein, who had replaced the injured Wilson ten

REPORTS BY BRIAN SWAIN PICTURES BY MARK RICHARDS

minutes earlier, collected the ball on the Town's right, on the edge of the penalty area. Brother Brian was available, with Foster screaming for the ball to be despatched for a corner.

The attempt to play the ball out of trouble failed as Clough won possession and fed Webb on the edge of the area. His route to goal was blocked, but Webb laid off the ball for Bowyer to try his luck. The shot deflected off Nicholas and gave Sealey no chance.

It was very rough justice, but for all the disappointment the result and the performance was full of promise for the new year.

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Sealey, Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Johnson; Wilson (Mark Stein, 80 mins), Nicholas, Grimes, Brian Stein, Newell, Harford.

FOREST: Segers; Fleming, Walker, Fairclough, Pearce; Mills, Bowyer, Webb, Carr; Clough, Campbell. Sub: Metgod, not used.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein header for the Town, 10th minute; Nigel Clough low shot for Forest, 73rd minute; Mike Newell shot for the Town, 85th minute; Ian Bowyer, deflected drive for Forest, in the second minute of injury time.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved and four wide; Forest eight saved, six wide, one hit the post and one netted but disallowed for offside. Corners: 9-2 to Forest.

REFEREE: Neil Midgley, Stoke. The Town felt he was a bit of a homer and that he played too much injury time. But he did at least resist pressure from fans and Forest players to give a daft penalty or two. He also booked Mick Harford and Peter Nicholas.

ATTENDANCE: 20,273. Only Arsenal, Manchester United and Sheffield Wednesday attracted more to the City Ground.

ENTERTAINMENT: A real Christmas cracker, and the return of Mick Harford was the icing on the cake.