

SKIPPER'S THE LAST

AN INJURY which has almost certainly ended Steve Foster's football season put the final painful touch to Luton Town's wretched day at Anfield.

Well wound up, still smarting from their inability to beat the Town in four previous attempts, and trying to regain top place in the First Division, Liverpool deserved their victory.

REPORT BY BRIAN SWAIN PICTURES: MARK RICHARDS

But they needed a little luck, on a day when both sides found the weather and conditions very difficult to cope with.

A penalty and an own goal settled it, in a game where Liverpool adapted better. It was a day for kick and hope, and chase everything, and Liverpool did it much better than the Town did.

"Our attitude helped us as much as anything," said Liverpool boss Kenny Dalglish.

Jan Molby added: "It was a game we particularly wanted to win."

The Kop was baying like a bull-fight crowd, demanding blood from the visitors and sweat from the home side, and few football grounds will give any team a more unfriendly welcome than the Liverpool crowd offered to the Town.

Referee Treford Mills seemed to catch the mean mood, dishing out five bookings for Town players and ignoring incidents which should have brought cautions for Molby and Craig Johnston.

NEEDLE

The needle showed as Liverpool set out to seek revenge for their FA Cup defeat, and sportsmanship hardly seemed the name of the game.

Dalglish, who dropped himself to allow Paul Walsh to return after suspension, praised all 11 Liverpool players for making it clear how much they wanted to win.

Sadly, the Town were way below average form, and never

set a real problem for Bruce Grobbelaar.

And Dalglish's whining about the synthetic pitch at Kenilworth Road was set oddly against Liverpool's acceptance of the lottery conditions at Anfield.

Some of the pitch was cleared of snow, while other parts were well covered. The blizzard persisted throughout the game and a team that relied on accurate passing needed to adapt or lose.

On that basis, the Town got what they deserved. The ball would not run true, the weighting of passes was impossible, and it was Liverpool who showed more appetite and ability to produce the basic long-ball soccer that was needed.

Town boss John Moore was not afforded the courtesy of an invitation to the post-match Press conference.

He came home feeling sick, but accepting that the result was fair.

"Liverpool are still the yardstick other teams are judged by," he said. "They're always very difficult to beat, particularly at their place, and in the circumstances they were particularly determined to do well against us."

Liverpool's reaction to losing to the Town in the cup was to introduce two new players, costing £1.2 million.

Striker John Aldridge was left on the bench on Saturday, with £400,000 Nigel Spackman the new recruit on show.

The Town had reverted to the midfield I prefer, with Ricky Hill on the right and Ashley Grimes on the left.

The problem for them and

Peter Nicholas was that Liverpool by-passed that department with long passes, enjoyed more possession, and had the pace of Rush and the good control of Walsh to give them regular targets for the long ball game.

The Town attack was just about starved, and the performance of referee Mills was little help.

JOKE

He gave the go-ahead to open the gates at 2 pm, and like Mr Moore I wonder if the game would have been completed if the half-time score-line had been 2-0 to the Town instead of to Liverpool.

Players were unable to keep their feet, and sliding tackles sent men slithering into the advert boards in frightening fashion.

"The pitch was a joke," said Mr Moore. "But it's no use cribbing. Liverpool deserved to win even if they did need a couple of lucky breaks to get the goals."

"You need to have 11 players going well to have a chance against Liverpool, and on the day they were better than we were."

My view was that the defence did a remarkably good job, and for all their territorial advantage Liverpool rarely forced Les Sealey into violent action.

He made an early save when Walsh jinked through the square back-line on the edge of the penalty area, and was able to stand and watch when Steve McMahon struck a blistering drive wide after good work by Molby, Rush and Walsh.

But the defence was scattered and falling about when

INJURY STRAW

Liverpool got their penalty breakthrough.

McMahon had played Rush through down the middle. Sealey raced out and managed to block the shot, but the ball ran loose. Spackman and McMahon followed up, and Foster handled to keep out the third shot, by Spackman.

Molby despatched the 17th-minute penalty, and despite the bitter weather the Kop warmed up appreciably.

The second lucky break for Liverpool came four minutes before the interval when they built a move down their right.

McMahon's pass found Rush well forward on the flank. He looked offside from my poor angle of vision, and from Foster's good one.

With no flag, Rush ham-

mered a hard low cross into the goalmouth, and the ball hit Mal Donaghy and pinged off him into the net.

On balance of play Liverpool should have added to their lead in the second half, but were rarely allowed to get to close quarters.

When they did Sealey saved from Walsh, and Rush hit a shot on the turn wide of the target.

Rush might have scored in the incident which led to Foster's premature departure, in the 69th minute.

The Welsh international accelerated to chase McMahon's through ball. Foster brought him down from behind, collected a booking for the foul, and limped off two minutes later to hear his fears confirmed.

Harford had been booked for a niggly challenge on Molby, but the Danish international got away with a worse one on Rob Johnson shortly afterwards.

Harford's response was another crunching late tackle on Barry Venison, but he escaped with a lecture when he might have been sent off.

Molby and Johnston showed that Liverpool could mix it as well, and so did Mark Lawrenson with a shove in the back on Harford which I am sure would have brought a penalty if it had happened at the other end.

Instead Mr Mills saw no foul. Perhaps he like most of us in the ground, had snow in his eyes.

In the last 15 minutes both teams settled for a policy of "never mind the ball, get on with the game" and the Town collected three more bookings in an incident in the 80th minute.

Johnston had been fouled by Grimes, and retaliated by hacking Grimes as the full-back tried to cover. Mr Mills incensed the Town by booking Grimes and not Johnston.

Robert Wilson, who had been put on as sub for Foster, had his say and was cautioned for dissent, and Sealey made the ball work, kicking it straight at Johnston.

He became the fifth Town player in the black book, while Liverpool fought through the 90 minutes without a blemish on their record.

And Mr Dalglish thinks Luton Town have an unfair advantage when they play at home!

But for all their mean and moody abilities, Liverpool showed that they are also an efficient football machine.

Determination and the will to win was enough to see off Luton Town, and the demanding public on Merseyside may well be treated to another league championship when the season ends in two months time.