

SOCCER SKILLS SEE OFF UNITED

THERE was satisfaction on several counts at Kenilworth Road after Luton Town ended the recent revival of Manchester United.

Manager John Moore and his men had been only too well aware of factors which could have made it a particularly difficult assignment.

And he quietly savoured the pleasure all of us shared at the way the Town showed how to mix quality with resilience.

The town were trying to recover from a depressing experience at Anfield.

They were without skipper Steve Foster, one of the best players in the Football League.

And they were up against a team which was unbeaten in the league this year as new manager Alex Ferguson works to give demanding supporters a United side to be proud of.

Ferguson and his men went home accepting that on the day Luton Town were the better side, and that fact alone gave Mr Moore most pleasure.

He was delighted that the Town deserved to win, and that the apparent gamble of making Mick Harford captain had paid off so rapidly.

Reports: BRIAN SWAIN

Pictures: MARK RICHARDS

After five bookings at Liverpool, it was a day for players to keep their heads and get on with football.

The Town did, United didn't, and the score-line hardly reflects the way the game went.

The Town were a mile ahead in attitude and ability in the first half, and only good work by goalkeeper Gary Bailey held it to 2-0 at the interval.

Like so many of the top sides, United seemed to lose control because they thought the ref was against them. Mr Ken Baker of Rugby was a bit of a puzzle and a bit of a homer as well. But United hardly helped themselves by churlish niggling when the Town were threatening to run riot.

Paul McGrath and Norman Whiteside were booked, and Bryan Robson was lucky to escape for a lot of moaning and groaning that most refs would call dissent.

At Liverpool the Town were reminded that refs are always right, even when they are

wrong. At Kenilworth Road it was United's turn. Perhaps it all balances out over the course of a season, but it's a pity we have to suffer imbalance from week to week.

Stacey North was again the choice to deputise for Foster at centre-half. United used only two front men for the first hour, the muscular Norman Whiteside and lightweight Terry Gibson, and North was rarely in any kind of trouble.

I had expected Mal Donaghy to take good care of the youngster. That he did — but it was noticeable that Tim Breacker and Rob Johnson also kept a close eye on the need to offer support.

With the back four dominant, Ricky Hill made England skipper Robson look second class for most of the game. His request for a fresh contract offer must surely be answered if he maintains the smooth link-up work, the clever control and the incisive passing that helped to torment United's midfield and defence.

Peter Nicholas and Ashley Grimes joined in the discomfort of the visitors and the inter-changing of Harford, Brian Stein and Mike Newell always looked potent when the Town attacked.

Best of all, the first half saw the Town make sweeping progress through the simple medium of good passing, to men taking up positive attacking positions, and well supported.

The first goal illustrated the point. Nicholas played a through ball down the middle. Harford controlled the ball on his chest, then headed it towards the left wing, into the path of Stein. He held off an attempted challenge by Colin Gibson, beat him in a tight space, then pulled the ball back for the midfielder in support, Nicholas.

TANTALISING

The cross was tantalising, delivered to the far post, and while United thought Bailey should have intercepted it, the presence of Harford and Newell together must have put him in two minds.

Harford got the touch, to put the Town ahead with only three minutes gone.

United, away winners only once this season, at Liverpool, buckled as the Town's confident interplay wove patterns of pleasure for the spectators.

Breacker and Johnson got up in support of attacks, and Bailey did well to save Stein's first-time drive from a cross by Breacker.

The goalkeeper produced an even better save to tip a free kick by Grimes over the bar, and was lucky when Hill headed narrowly wide from a far post cross by Johnson.

Bailey held out until the 40th minute, when the Town's second goal arrived. Hill and Stein attacked down the middle, exchanging passes, and sliced through the cover.

Bailey narrowed the angle for the frontal attack, but Stein's carefully-timed and

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN 2 MANCHESTER UTD 1 HALF-TIME: 2-0

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Stacey North, Donaghy, Johnson; Hill, Nicholas, Grimes; Brian Stein, Newell, Harford. Sub: Mark Stein, not needed.

MANCHESTER UNITED: Bailey; Sivebaek, McGrath, Moran, Colin Gibson (Davenport, 64 mins); Strachan, Robson, Duxbury, O'Brien; Whiteside, Terry Gibson.

THE GOALS: Mick Harford, three minutes, from Peter Nicholas's cross to the far post; Brian Stein, 40 minutes, after he and Ricky Hill inter-passed through the centre of the United defence; Bryan Robson for United, 87 minutes, scramble after Les Sealey blocked Terry Gibson's shot. **OTHER STRIKES:** Town nine saved, nine wide, one deflected onto the bar; United four saved and three wide. **Corners:** 6-2 to United.

REFEREE: Ken Baker, Rugby. Pedantic and puzzling at times, with United believing he was as much a homer as the Town had suffered a week previously at Liverpool. They would have done better to get on with the game instead of moaning and groaning so much.

BOOKED: Paul McGrath for dissent, Norman Whiteside for making an intimidatory gesture. Whiteside's score so far: nine goals, ten bookings, two suspensions.

ATTENDANCE: 12,509, swollen by the most visiting fans so far this season. The vast majority of Reds' supporters who got in behaved impeccably, and moved away when a handful causing trouble on the Kenilworth Road terrace. Police ejected 30.

ENTERTAINMENT: Top value for money. The Town's first-half show was one of the best for long time. United forced their way into contention after the interval but were kept out until it was too late to matter.

neatly placed low shot gave the Town the cushion they deserved.

And it was nearly a three-goal lead because Bailey had to go full-length to keep out a blockbuster by Breacker.

The keeper was in action in the first few seconds after the break, pawing a header by Harford onto the bar, and then made his best save of the match after Donaghy released Stein down the middle.

The goalkeeper blocked Stein's drive, and defied the odds to deny Harford as well when the centre-forward fastened onto the rebound.

Alex Ferguson knew that his side was on the ropes, and decided to take off defender Colin Gibson and send on Peter Davenport as an extra attacker.

Perhaps he should have taken that positive view in his original team selection, because for the last half-hour it was an evenly contested match between two good sides.

But Whiteside threw away a chance when he headed wide from a cross by Terry Gibson and when United got their first good shot on target, in the 66th minute, Les Sealey made a difficult save from Robson look easy.

The goalkeeper also got down quickly to smother a free kick by John Sivebaek and United's persistence paid off too late to affect the result.

Gibson jinked into the danger area from a pass delivered by Whiteside, Sealey made the block, and Robson toe-poked in United's 87th-minute consolation.