

Hit and run at Selhurst

86/87

EVEN MANAGER John Moore, who is paid to win games for Luton Town, admitted that deep down he felt a little sorry for Charlton on Saturday at Selhurst Park.

In the death throes of their fight to stay alive in the First Division, Charlton mounted almost non-stop attacks, failed to unsettle two defensive formations, and then were murdered by a late goal against the run of play.

From the Town's point of view it was a thoroughly professional snatch job to achieve their fourth away win and their third double of the season.

And if the attack, without injured Brian Stein, was a touch lacklustre again, the resilience in defence and midfield was admirable.

But if Charlton's finishing had matched their exuberant approach work it would have been a different story.

Robert Lee, 21, was the worst culprit. He looked an exciting prospect with his ability to run at men, or into the right space, then spoiled it all by failing to get shots on target.

And for all the Charlton pressure, Les Sealey was never seriously tested.

His only worrying moments were when Colin Walsh smashed a 20-yarder against the bar in the 11th minute, and when Lee got clear midway through the second half. Sealey raced out, upended the striker, and the Town escaped the penalty which I thought Jim Borrett should have awarded.

"That was typical of our luck this season," said Lee. "We must be the only team in the country that hasn't had a single penalty awarded to us all season."

The Town manager kept his promise to give one of his bright young prospects a go. Gary Cobb, 18, replaced Brian Stein, and in his First Division debut experienced joy and despair.

Charlton's all-out attacking was beginning to lose its momentum in the second half when Ricky Hill and Mal Donaghy broke out down the left.

Mike Newell beat John Humphrey on the by-line, cut out goalkeeper Bob Bolder with a pulled back cross, and laid on an open goal for the debutant. But Cobb's side-footed attempt went well wide.

Cobb put it all behind him with four minutes to go with a low and accurate cross from the right which Mick Harford converted easily for his seventh goal of the season.

CLASSIC

Charlton had been forced to abandon caution and push forward, and Harford's goal was a classic illustration of the difference between top and bottom of the First Division.

The build-up and finish was economical and expert, while much of Charlton's work reflected the desperation of a team that had to win to stave off relegation fears.

They were robbed of leading scorer Jim Melrose by a stomach virus, and manager Lenzie Lawrence, impressive in his bearing in troubled times, announced that had he known how blunt his attack would be he would have had Melrose carried out on a stretcher to play as long as he could.

CHARLTON ATH 0 LUTON TOWN 1

Ironically, the stretcher had made an unwelcome appearance two minutes before the interval when Tim Breacker's unfortunate afternoon ended with a serious injury.

Mark Stuart had caused the defender a few problems, playing as an orthodox winger and showing some quick and clever ball skills.

Breacker had roused the crowd's anger with some uncompromising tackles, and the one that damaged his knee ligament was a late challenge, and a clear foul.

Darron McDonough went on as sub, and Stuart was rarely as dangerous in the second half as he had been in the first.

The enforced changes illustrated that in defence at least the Town have talent in reserve. Ashley Grimes was out with a knee injury, and 17-year-old Richard Harvey strolled through what might have been a difficult afternoon.

Stacey North, 22, has developed into a better player as Steve Foster's stand-in thanks to the longest run of his career in the league side, and Breacker, 21 and Rob Johnson, 25, are worthy rivals for the right back place. And Mal Donaghy again looked ageless at Selhurst Park, even though he will be 30 in September.

Charlton gave Garth Crooks his first start in their red shirts following his transfer from West Brom, but he was so ineffective that Lawrence took him off for the final desperate fling.

He preferred an untried youngster, Colin Leaburn, for the last 20 minutes.

It made little difference, because the Town carried more than enough poise at the back to frustrate Charlton.

CRUELTY

It was cruelty to dumb footballers when the Town snatched their unlikely win, a case of a bunch of triers being shown an escape hatch and then having it slammed on their figures.

The debate about synthetic pitches also came to mind. On a grass surface which is used by two league clubs, players of both sides were set problems that should be unnecessary in the First Division.

Wear and tear showed, the bounce was not consistent, and when it came to individual ball control the Town looked more skilful and composed. Charlton had the hustle and bustle, Luton the cool composure.

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Sealey, Breacker (McDonough, 42 mins), North, Donaghy, Harvey, Hill, Nicholas, Preece, Cobb, Newell, Harford.

CHARLTON: Bolder, Humphrey, Shirtliff, Miller, Reid, Milne, Peake, Walsh, Stuart, Crooks (Leaburn, 66 mins), Lee.

THE GOAL: Mick Harford, 86th minute, simple shot from cross by debutant Gary Cobb.

OTHER STRIKES: Town three saved and four wide; Charlton five saved, eight wide, one hit the bar. Corners: 13-1 to Charlton.

ATTENDANCE: 5,469, on a ground that the locals of Charlton, eight miles away, find too inconvenient to reach.

REFEREE: Jim Borrett. It looked harsh when he booked Peter Nicholas for a foul on Andy Peake. But he was very kind to the Town when he decided a challenge by Les Sealey on Robert Lee did not warrant a penalty to Charlton.

ENTERTAINMENT: Interesting rather than inspiring, with Charlton going hell for leather for goals, wasting a lot of chances and being put down and out by a late sucker punch.