

Chelsea make it Bridge of sighs

FOR AN HOUR at Stamford Bridge the Town looked capable of nicking a point through determined well-organised defence.

Some of us even dreamed of the possibility that it could be the classic football hit and run robbery, as Chelsea became more and more frustrated at their inability to turn pressure into penalty area openings.

But once Chelsea broke the deadlock after 63 minutes it was difficult to see where the Town reply might come from. On the day Chelsea deserved their revenge for the double they suffered at the Town's hands last season, even if the Town were not really three goals worse.

But with Mick Harford and Brian Stein both confined to touch-line seats, the reserve strike force of Mike Newell and Meka Nwajiobi was not sharp enough.

Their support from midfield was inconsistent, partly because Chelsea had so much more possession that the Town were often forced to funnel back and worry more about defence than attack.

Yet, having defended so well, the Town could have earned something from the game if they had been able to cash in on counter-attacks, when they caught Chelsea stretched.

FOOTBALLING GIANT

Mal Donaghy, back after suspension, strode through the match like a giant among pygmies, easily the most complete footballer on view.

He had to be, because Steve Foster had his hands full when he faced the pace and power of Chelsea's front runners, Kerry Dixon and Gordon Lurie.

They veered off to the flanks intelligently, and midfielders backed up well, and the Town were fortunate that Chelsea failed in one glaring aspect; delivering an accurate final pass.

Frustration crept in for Chelsea and their fans, not least because the Town included an offside trap in their strategy. It was effective, even if it did not add to the entertainment, and certainly it won no friends.

The pre-match antics of Chelsea chairman Ken Bates, including a column in the £1 match programme having a go at David Evans, did little to improve the atmosphere.

CHELSEA 3 TOWN 0

There was a little niggle in the game too, and referee Vic Callow was excellent, calming down, and dressing down when necessary, without resort to the book.

A 13th-minute incident was a case in point: Donaghy bent down to head a cross away as Darron Wood steamed in to try to get a boot to the ball. Donaghy got a facefull of pain, and David Preece and Les Sealey piled in to demand action. Wood, Preece and Sealey were all lectured, Donaghy recovered, and thankfully everyone got on with the game.

Half-way through the first period Donaghy was fouled by Durie, whose late challenge opened a gash which needed seven stitches in the shin.

The Irish international's continued bravery deserved some reward, but sadly his excellence at the back could not be matched by anyone at the front — including Chelsea.

PATTERN AND PACE

Newell and Nwajiobi were willing workers, but the midfield, again changed by circumstances, rarely imposed itself as an attacking force.

Robert Wilson was a late replacement for injured Danny, but neither he nor Ricky Hill could deliver what was needed — the ability to get hold of the game and dictate pattern and pace.

Gary Cobb again showed that he has the potential to become a First Division player, but needs more games to build up experience.

He had one of the few clear chances created in the first hour, and might have snatched an unlikely lead for the Town. David Preece, working hard in a dual capacity as extra marker on Pat Nevin and pivot for counter-attacks, sent Newell on a run in which the striker did brilliantly to go past two opponents. His cross was well placed, but Cobb's volley was snatched in haste on the edge of the penalty area, and went over the bar.

Nwajiobi carved out a couple of half-chances for himself but had his shots saved, and the nearest to a first-half goal came when Nevin got clear, with the offside decision due but not given. Sealey, who had been well protected until then, made a vital spreading save.

The pattern after the interval was similar, with Donaghy and Foster marshalling a hard-worked defence.

Tim Breacker kept cool and Ashley Grimes worked hard to stop Nevin making full use of the ball as

Chelsea tried to attack down their right.

But the home side had width and possession, and slowly more chances began to arrive, with Steve Clarke side-footing one wide and Donaghy clearing when Dixon's cross-shot was flighted over Sealey.

CRUEL IRONY

And the first goal was as cruel an irony as any team can suffer. In the 62nd minute the Town produced the day's best move, with the ball flowing from deep inside their own half. Preece, Foster and Nwajiobi inter-passed, Preece got down the left from Nwajiobi's incisive diagonal pass and Chelsea were glad to scramble the ball away for a corner. From that, Newell's header was blocked and the same fate befell Nwajiobi's drive from the rebound.

Chelsea were lucky to survive, but from the clearance they cashed in. Breacker was caught in possession just outside the penalty area, Tony Dorigo robbed him and passed inside. John Coady, deputy for injured Mike Hazard, tried a shot, mis-timed it, and enjoyed his good fortune as the ball went through Foster's legs and into the net, with Sealey deceived by the mixture of effort and error.

The Town now had to push forward and give Chelsea more attacking scope. Grimes, Newell and Preece combined in an attack from which Hill headed wide when an equaliser looked on the cards.

But with the defence softened up for an hour, and the attack out of sorts, Chelsea grabbed two more goals in the latter stages.

Durie got the better of Grimes to hit a far post cross for Niven to score, and Dixon smacked in a quality third goal, bursting down the inside right channel and blasting a drive from 20 yards into the net off the underside of the bar.

THE MATCH DETAILS ^{87/89}

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Grimes; Cobb, Robert Wilson, Hill, Preece; Newell, Nwajiobi. Subs: North and Black, not used.

CHELSEA: Niedzwiecki; Clarke, Wicks, McLaughlin, Dorigo; Nevin, Wood, C. Wilson, Coady; Dixon, Durie. Subs: K. Wilson, McNaught, not used.

THE GOALS: John Coady, 63 minutes, Pat Niven, 70 minutes, and Kerry Dixon, 81 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town three saved and five wide; Chelsea five saved and six wide. Corners: 10-3 to Chelsea.

ATTENDANCE: 16,075, a rise of 3,000 on last season's game, when Chelsea were riddled with problems and Luton directors were welcomed. This time they were barred, and watched the reserves at Kenilworth Road instead.

REFEREE: Vic Callow, Solihull: kept good control and exercised good common sense throughout.

ENTERTAINMENT: Little for the Town fans, with defensive organisation appreciated but the lack of forward power punished decisively once Chelsea had broken through.