

ANOTHER CASE OF 'IF ONLY' . . .

87/88

FIVE GAMES WITHOUT a victory was hardly the sort of start anyone wanted at Kenilworth Road for the new season.

But manager Ray Harford hid his bank holiday disappointment on Monday after Arsenal held the Town to their second home draw in three matches.

At least it was a good game for the customers to enjoy, he said. And he is still certain that he and his men are on the right lines for a good season despite the poor early results.

Supporters I chatted to after the game had mixed feelings about that.

There was general agreement that the match, particularly in the first half, had produced interesting soccer and fair entertainment.

Yet, but for a hawk-eyed referee who spotted a penalty infringement that mystified most of the crowd, the Town could easily have been losers.

LUTON TN 1 ARSENAL 1

The balance between attack and defence still seems to be something of a problem as Mr Harford seeks the right blend to improve the goals output.

At Chelsea midfielders had to defend, and it was still all for nothing.

At home, as against Arsenal, the defence tends to look more suspect than it used to when the plan is to commit more men to attack.

On Monday the positive ideas were let down by the inability to make clever approach work count where it matters most.

Reports by Brian Swain. Pictures: Gareth Owen

Mr Harford's belief is that after all the enforced team changes, the early season signs are not as poor as the results might suggest.

The customers' complaint is that two points from the first 15 begins to tax patience a little. So far, it has turned out to be a case of a team flattering to deceive.

Yet my feeling is that when it does click it can be a footballing side good enough to take on the best. All we ask is that it should start clicking before too many more games have gone.

Some of Monday's wounds were self-inflicted. I wondered what Mick Harford might have made of an Arsenal defence that often looked nervous and edgy. If Harford hadn't lost his cool at Derby, it might have been different.

And if the Town's early powerplay which threatened to sweep aside Arsenal had brought a goal or two, it might have been different . . .

"On our first-half performance we should have won the game," said Mr Harford. "It would have been nice if we could have got the cushion of a couple of goals that seemed possible."

The positive enjoyment came from seeing Danny Wilson return after missing the Chelsea match to inject more forward running from midfield.

David Preece stretched Arsenal on the Town's left, and Ricky Hill came back to form to give the Town mastery of the crucial department for long periods.

Steve Foster drifted in to meet Hill's chipped free kick

with a header that went wide, Wilson whacked a 25-yarder inches over the bar, and Preece miskicked in front of goal from Wilson's pulled-back cross.

Brian Stein returned after injury to resume his telepathic understanding with Hill, playing as the deep attacker behind Mike Newell and Meka Nwajiobi.

Tim Breacker was the best right winger on view, as well as a dependable full-back, and it was a shock when Arsenal's first attack brought a goal.

The Town stopped, expecting offside, when Perry Groves waltzed past Ashley Grimes. Foster was still moving upfield, and if it was an attempt to play an offside trap it got what it deserved. Apart from being boring, it always risks a linesman's error.

Groves didn't bother to wait for a decision, and although Les Sealey saved at his feet Paul Davis rattled in the rebound to give Arsenal a 14th-minute lead.

Three minutes later came a shock for Arsenal as referee Ray Lewis watched Preece float in a free kick from the left. Arsenal cleared, but Mr Lewis had seen David O'Leary nudge Newell out of the danger area before the ball arrived.

O'Leary became the first of five men to be booked for arguing about the penalty award, which was a mystery to both managers as well as to him. It needed a video playback to discover that Mr Lewis was right.

Wilson deputised for Harford as penalty taker, and beat Lukic from the spot to lift the Town and their fans.

Breacker's run and cross from the right brought a hectic scramble as Newell and Nwajiobi were crowded out, and Hill had a header saved from a cross by Grimes.

But Arsenal were also able to find paths through to goal and Sealey made the best save of the first half to tip Alan Smith's header round the post after a cross by Graham Rix had found him in space.

Smith, an £800,000 signing from Leicester, and a hat-trick man in Arsenal's home win over Portsmouth on Saturday, might have nicked another treble in the second half.

The entertainment fell away after the interval, with Arsenal playing a more cagey game, and contributing to a stop/start pattern.

Mr Lewis played into their hands to some degree, although he had to keep firm control. He booked Steve Williams for a crude tackle on Preece, and also cautioned Grimes and Donaghy for fouls. Groves joined O'Leary in the book for dissent.

Interruptions to the flow of the game suited Arsenal, and as the Town tried to put on concerted pressure the defences looked vulnerable to counter-attacks.

Smith had three chances, but one cross from Groves was a yard away from him, and when others were on the mark Smith's shooting wasn't.

Yet Kenny Sansom and O'Leary showed touches of panic with clearances.

Mark Stein was sent on for Newell for the last 17 minutes, but by then Arsenal had worked out how to keep the Town attack at bay.

But the sub nearly provided the match-winner that would have made all the difference. In injury time his far post cross, after being sent clear by Wilson, was met by Preece's deliberate downward header and Lukic produced a wonder save to push the ball round the post.

Arsenal boss George Graham thought the save made the result right. He thought the Town had the better of the first half, and Arsenal the second, and was quite content to settle for a point.

DETAILS

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Grimes; Hill, Danny Wilson, Preece; Brian Stein, Nwajiobi, Newell (Mark Stein, 73 mins). Unused sub: Johnson.

ARSENAL: Lukic; Thomas, O'Leary, Adams, Sansom; Rocastle, Williams, Davis, Rix; Groves, Smith. Subs, not used: Merson, Richardson.

GOALS: Paul Davis for Arsenal, 14 mins, after Perry Groves beat the offside trap; Danny Wilson for the Town, penalty, 17 mins, after O'Leary pushed Mike Newell.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved and nine wide; Arsenal seven saved and five wide. Corners: 6-4 to the Town.

REFEREE: Ray Lewis, Great Bookham. Eagle-eyed for which the Town might be grateful.

BOOKED: O'Leary and Groves for dissent, Williams for a foul, and Grimes and Donaghy for fouls.

ATTENDANCE: 8,745 — a drop of 1,000 on last season's Arsenal visit, when there was no price rise for "star matches".

ENTERTAINMENT: Very good. It would be brilliant if it brought the goals as well.