

ATTACKING FLAIR

87/88

Match details

OXFORD 2 LUTON TOWN 5
HALF-TIME: 1-2

LUTON TOWN: Sealey, Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Grimes; Hill, D. Wilson, Preece (Johnson, 73 mins); B. Stein (M. Stein, 83 mins), Nwajiobi, Harford.

OXFORD UTD: Hucker; Langan, Slatter, Caton, Dreyer (Rhoades-Brown 83 mins); Houghton, Reck (Mustoe, 45 mins), Hebberd; Foyle, Whitehurst, Saunders.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein looping header, 33 mins; Neil Slatter from goalmouth scramble, 51 mins; Tim Breacker, low drive, 44 mins; Meka Nwajiobi, diving header, 25 seconds into second half; Ricky Hill, low drive, 70 mins; Mick Harford, 25 yard lob, 74 mins; Martin Foyle for Oxford, close range shot, 77 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved and ten wide; Oxford seven saved and two wide, plus one deflected onto the bar, leading to a goal. Corners: 9-3 to Oxford.

ATTENDANCE: 6,804, Oxford's lowest ever in the First Division and 2,000 down on the gate for the Town's last visit. There were fewer than usual in the visitors' cages.

REFEREE: John Deakin, South Wales — excellent, thanks to both teams being on their best behaviour.

ENTERTAINMENT: A match to remember, with the Town back to their old formation, 4-4-2 ditched, and Oxford swept aside by cavalier attacking. And there could have been even more goals, at both ends.

THE DEBATE AT Oxford after Luton Town's best performance and result for a long time posed a question which may be answered on Saturday, when league champions Everton come to Kenilworth Road.

Luton eyes saw a marvellous Town team performance, founded on an adventurous attacking spirit with nine of the 11 men David Pleat used to call his A team.

Oxford manager Maurice Evans, who concentrated on watching the home side, put the result down to a rubbish performance from them. "They threw in the towel," he said. "Luton played quite well because we allowed them to. They outplayed us at everything and deserved to win.

"Some of our men looked as though they wanted to walk off after Luton went 3-1 up just after half-time. It was our worst performance since I have been here."

Ray Harford declined to follow that tack. "Managers concentrate on their own teams," he said. "I saw the sort of performance I want, even though I wasn't too happy about our defending at times.

"We played well for half a game at home against West Ham and Arsenal. I asked for that sort of performance to be continued, and got it.

"It's a cavalier approach, and we will give away goals. That's all right as long as we score more, and it makes for entertainment."

Meka Nwajiobi, scorer of the killer goal that made it 3-1 just 25 seconds after the interval, shared the team's pleasure at a job well done. "Don't forget that except for Mitchell Thomas and Peter Nicholas, that was David Pleat's old A team," he said. "The new manager has got us back to that style, and we like it."

Brian Stein, in partnership alongside Mick Harford again for the first time this season since the first four minutes of the opening day, made a similar point. "Last season we were tight at the back, and defenders were told to hoof it away, and that wasn't really our game.

"We tried a 4-4-2 formation at the start of this season, but now we have switched to all-out attack. It's the only way we know how to play. We thrive on it."

For Mr Harford the first win of the season was vindication of his belief that early season results were not as bad as his team's general form.

He had the bonus of a full strength squad available for the first time since the Derby trip, and has accepted that his original tactics had to be changed.

RETURNS

Ricky Hill has gone back to the right of midfield, with Danny Wilson in the centre, and while Hill's old play-making skill was a major cause of Oxford's humiliation, Wilson's quieter contribution in holding the middle was equally important.

Oxford missed injured Gary Shelton in that department and their midfield was atrocious. Or was it just destroyed, as the Town's slick passing created and converted huge gaps?

Teenager Sean Reck deputised, and had a nightmare league debut before being spared further agony through substitution at half time.

At that stage it was only 2-1 to the Town, but the sheer quality of their football had put them in control.

Steve Foster and Mal Donaghy were more than a match for Billy Whitehurst, the only Oxford attacker who seemed to be trying his hardest.

Tim Breacker cashed in on Oxford's weakness down the flank by doing what comes naturally to him: joining Hill as an extra right winger.

Ashley Grimes was able to stroll through the game, Preece enjoyed a bit of a romp down the left, and Oxford were bamboozled by the variety of attacking ideas from Nwajiobi, Stein and Mick Harford. All three front men used the full width of the pitch to capitalise on Hill's excellence.

Harford was often the right winger and Stein the left, and with men in support down the middle Oxford, with centre half Gary Briggs out injured, were torn apart.

If the Town reproduce the Oxford performance on Saturday even Everton will be hard pushed to keep them out. But Everton will, surely, be more destructive on the counter-attacks.

The Town's attacking commitment leaves the defence with less cover than it had last season, and at times they were lucky to survive as Oxford wasted chances to counter attack. The score might have been something like 8-5 at the end.

The contest was between the Town's sharp incisive passing and Oxford's more basic attempts to play a direct long-ball game.

Quality earned its reward, and the Town might have had more than five goals. Harford was inches away from the target twice with near-post headers under

pressure. Nwajiobi crowned an amazing five-man passing move with a bicycle kick which was saved. Preece drove wide from the edge of the box after Harford's dummy made the space to Hill's cross and Wilson hit a screamer the wrong side of the post from Stein's delightful square pass.

Oxford's chances, like their goals, came more into the scramble category. The real quality came from the five gems the Town produced.

The goals timetable went like this:

● **33 mins:** Trevor Hebberd stopped Hill on the Town's right wing with a foul. Preece curled in a left-foot free kick and Stein, on the near post, looped a header over Peter Hucker into the far corner for his first goal of the season.

● **41 mins:** Houghton's right wing corner for Oxford was flicked on at the near post by Martin Foyle. Dean Saunders headed for goal, Sealey made an amazing save to push the ball onto the bar, but Neil Slatter charged in to bundle the rebound over the line.

● **44 mins:** Breacker tried a run down the inside right channel, passed forward to Stein, took the return, went on past two defenders and drove into the far corner.

● **46 mins:** straight from the second half kick-off Stein sent Harford down the right. He left the marker stranded, centred accurately to drop the ball between two defenders and Nwajiobi, who had raced down the middle, went full-length to power in a stunning header.

● **70 mins:** Harford attacked down the left, and fed Nwajiobi. Tommy Caton dived in, was left like a beached whale as Nwajiobi skipped clear, and the cross was pulled back for Hill to bury the shot to become the Town's fourth man to open his season's account.

● **74 mins:** An Oxford attack broke down, Stein saw Harford in space in midfield, and played a through ball to him. Harford, unattended, saw Hucker beginning to advance, and from 25 yards produced a delicate lob for his third goal of the season.

● **77 mins:** Dean Saunders, two-goal hero of Oxford's win at Kenilworth Road late last season, had a shot charged down, and Foyle scored from the rebound. Most of the crowd had already gone home.