

UNITED PAY THEIR RESPECTS

WHILE LUTON TOWN manager Ray Harford accepted Saturday's draw with Manchester United more happily than some of the fans, his opposite number went back to Old Trafford with a different view.

"We should have won it," said Alex Ferguson, whose new-look team believes it has a chance of landing the championship.

But he had showed the deep respect, and perhaps a little fear, that can affect even top teams when they face matches at Kenilworth Road.

United adopted a defensive strategy to show that despite the Town's patchy start they can still draw back-handed compliments from rivals.

With David Preece failing a fitness test, the Town kept faith in a team with two young wingers, Kingley Black and Micky Weir.

LUTON TOWN 1 MAN UNITED 1

SWEEPER

Ferguson went for a sweeper system, with skipper Bryan Robson withdrawn from midfield again and tidying up behind the back four.

England manager Bobby Robson was watching, having been advised by Ferguson to think of his skipper as more of a defender than a midfielder.

But the United boss said sweeper Robson was not the shape of things to come. "That was a one-off. We did it because of the surface, and because of the way Luton play."

The tactic went close to making the Town's home record even more disappointing than the current one win in five league outings.

United broke quickly, and should have snatched the first goal when the Town were caught stretched.

Paul McGrath went on a storming run from central defence down the right wing, had two men spare, and gave Mike Duxbury an easy opening. Fortunately for the Town Les Sealey read the situation perfectly and smothered Duxbury's shot.

MISTAKE

Billy Garton, a midfielder deputising for injured Remi Moses, was played alongside McGrath, and detailed to mark Mick Harford. Ferguson realised his mistake at half-time, when McGrath was given the job, with Garton taking care of Brian Stein.

By then Harford had already demonstrated why United are among the clubs thinking about making a bid for him. Elusive and menacing, he put the Town ahead in the 19th minute with a powerful header after Steve Foster had flicked on a corner by Weir.

Robson found his work cut out covering the danger of Harford, and was lucky to get the free kick his way when the pair tangled and most of us thought it should have been a penalty.

Without hitting top form, the Town had the better of the first half, although Brian McClair was twice foiled by Sealey when the defence was caught looking very square and slow to retreat.

Norman Whiteside was his usual intimidating self, but at least the Town had the steely determination not to be muscled

ed out of it.

Danny Wilson gives away inches and pounds, but more than punches his weight, and is becoming the man the Town's midfield pivots around.

Ricky Hill still excites when he drives forward, and nearly got the second goal with a low drive which was deflected by Robson.

Gary Walsh made a good save, and produced an even better one in the last seconds of the first half when Wilson smashed in a swinging 35-yarder.

Two minutes after the interval another escape left United lucky to be in with a chance. Foster's header from another dangerous corner by Weir hit the top of the bar and bounced over.

But United had sorted themselves out at half-time. They abandoned the idea of using McClair as a one-man attack.

Garton moved forward to midfield, releasing Whiteside to play alongside McClair. Jesper Olsen and Gordon Strachen were given more service on the wings and United got their game going.

They seemed to get the feel of the pitch, their passing became more accurate, and the Town's defence was given a searching test.

It passed, after United had scored a 54th-minute equaliser. Whiteside's shot was blocked by Sealey but McClair headed home from the rebound.

HERO

On the run of play United could have won, but they were up against one of football's quiet heroes in Mal Donaghy.

He does his job so unobtrusively that we almost take him for granted. The covering, positional play and tackling were just about faultless as United strove for the win they needed to keep the leaders within reach.

Tim Breacker and Ashley Grimes joined Donaghy and Foster in a second half which called for defiance and determination.

The crowd was not too happy by a double substitution with half an hour to go. Weir and Black were taken off and

Darron McDonough and Mark Stein went on.

Mr Harford explained that the decision was made because he felt that United were set to run all over the Town if something was not done to tighten up.

It worked in the sense that it prevented possible defeat. The crowd's displeasure was at the sight of both wingers going off. The majority feeling was that Brian Stein was having an off day, and that he should have changed places with his brother.

Mr Harford's contention was that United were the best team the Town have met so far this season and that his own men were already failing to make use of the wingers.

It's so long since we have had them at Kenilworth Road, he suggested, that players need time to get used to the system of playing with wide attackers.

In the event, either side might have nicked the win, although I thought neither deserved to lose.

Harford, with little service in the second half, went close at one end and Strachen, put clear by Whiteside in the inside right position, wasted a chance at the other by shooting at Sealey.

And referee Mike Reed turned down further penalty appeals when Mark Stein was blocked by Robson in a late

Town attack.

And while some of us worry at a league table showing only nine points from the first ten games, Mr Ferguson was in no doubt that Mr Harford had read things aright with the substitutions.

"Luton had the better of the first half," he said. "Then we changed things at half-time, and I thought we were the better side."

"I thought we were going to win after Brian McClair scored, but then Luton changed things once more with the substitutions."

MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Grimes; Weir (McDonough, 60 mins), Hill, Wilson, Black (Mark Stein, 60 mins); Brian Stein, Harford.

UNITED: Walsh; Robson; Blackmore (O'Brien 75 mins), Garton, McGrath, Gibson; Duxbury, Whiteside, Strachen, Olsen; McClair.

THE GOALS: Mick Harford header, 19 mins; Brian McClair header, 54 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved, four wide, one hit the bar; United six saved and five wide. Corners: 5-4 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 9,137, highest of the season so far, but 3,000 down on last year's United visit.

REFEREE: Mike Reed, Birmingham. Some decisions were difficult to understand, and a linesman who missed the occasional offside was not much help.

BOOKED: Steve Foster, for the third time this season, for a trip on Jesper Olsen.

ENTERTAINMENT: The dropping of two home points take the shine off any game, including this one.