

Harford's hat-trick decisive

LUTON TOWN 4 WIGAN ATHLETIC 2
(Aggregate 5-2) 87/88 (FLC)

A WELCOME CONFIDENCE-BOOSTER saw Luton Town ease into the third round of the Littlewoods Cup on Tuesday night. Mick Harford scored a superb hat-trick, leaving half a dozen First Division clubs to ponder on the £1 million valuation the Town have slapped on him.

It also left me wondering how Luton Town will fare if, as seems likely, the big centre-forward leaves before the end of the season to seek his last big-money deal.

Both managers agreed that Harford was the difference as plucky Wigan were seen off.

The Third Division club was never allowed to put together the attacking passing moves that put the Town under pressure at Springfield Park in the first leg.

Yet they still caused a missed heartbeat or two when they came back from three down to make it 3-2 on the night with 20 minutes to go.

"Mick Harford was the difference between the sides," said Wigan manager Ray Mathias. "He was magnificent."

Town boss Ray Harford agreed, and admitted that he had become a little nervous when Steve Foster's own goal saw Wigan pull back from 3-0 to 3-2 in the space of 13 minutes.

Harford settled everything with a thunderbolt drive to complete his first hat-trick since Watford came to Luton in April 1986.

It ended a spell when the Town were in danger of getting sloppy because the tie seemed to be a formality when they took a three-goal lead by half-time, making it 4-0 on aggregate.

Wigan refused to give up, even if the class gap showed. Fortunately for the Town

Wigan's final pass let them down regularly.

For the Town, it was a night of continued experiment, with Kingsley Black and Micky Weir again used as wingers.

Harford concentrated on the central attacking thrust, with Brian Stein behind him.

Andy Holden tried to shadow Harford, and occasionally got away with a little judicious shoving. But even that could not quieten the man of the moment.

With Darron McDonough replacing injured Ricky Hill in midfield, the Town made quality tell in that department.

Weir played as a front-running winger and Kingsley Black made a telling contribution with his work between midfield and the left wing.

McDonough and Danny Wilson were always dependable and the Town spent so much of the first half in all-out attack that nine Wigan breaks fell into an offside trap which operated almost up to the halfway line.

Foster and Mal Donaghy seemed to find it easy against the unsupported Bobby Campbell in the centre of Wigan's attack, and Tim Breacker and Ashley Grimes were never embarrassed as much as Wigan full-backs John Butler and Paul Beesley.

For 25 minutes Wigan held out, without threatening to cause much damage of their own.

Stuart Storer, on loan from Everton, saved the visitors with a clearance off the line from Foster's overhead kick after Breacker's persistence had won a corner.

But no-one could stop the powerful header which Harford produced in the 25th minute from an accurate cross by Breacker after a simple pass move involving McDonough and Brian Stein.

Storer might have pinched an equaliser when the Town were caught upfield by a quick break, but saw his shot deflected wide from an opening created by a crossfield pass by Ian Griffiths.

Dave Redfern, Wigan's third goalkeeper this season, who is on loan from Rochdale, saved well from Foster before Weir's right wing cross gave Harford the chance to bullet in another header, in the 35th minute.

Three minutes later McDonough hit a fierce 25-yard drive which beat Redfern's dive. The ball hit the post, bounced against Redfern, and rebounded into the net.

At 3-0 the game seemed all over, and we were not too worried when Black and

Wilson saw shots saved. But in the 50th minute Wigan nearly grabbed a chance when Mark Hilditch sneaked in behind Foster's weak back pass and was stopped by Les Sealey when a goal should have been scored.

Midfielder David Hamilton set his forwards an example in the 57th minute, timing a run perfectly to meet a corner by Storer with a header to make it 3-1.

And with 20 minutes to go Paul Jewell made a run down the right, crossed hard and low, and celebrated as Foster's clearance attempt knocked the ball into his own net.

Wigan found new heart from that, but two minutes later Harford, who had seen a brainy chip float the wrong side of the bar earlier, exchanged passes with Grimes and lashed in the killer goal with his left foot from the inside left position on the edge of the penalty area.

It was a goal of real First Division quality, in the making and the taking, and the fans who stayed away missed a real treat.

DETAILS

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Grimes; McDonough, Wilson, Black; Weir, Brian Stein, Harford. Subs: Johnson and Mark Stein, not used.

WIGAN: Redfern; Butler, Holden, Cribble, Beesley; Storer, Hilditch, Hamilton, Griffiths; Jewell, Campbell. (Ainscow, 81 mins). Other sub: Knowles, not used.

GOALS: Mick Harford hat-trick, headers 25 and 35 mins, cross-shot 72 mins; Darron McDonough, 38 mins, shot off a post and off the grounded goalkeeper; David Hamilton header for Wigan 57 mins; Steve Foster, own goal for Wigan, 70 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town nine saved, eight wide, one hit a post and became a goal; Wigan four saved five wide, corners: 5-4 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 4,227, lowest of the season.

REFEREE: Ron Groves, Weston-Super-Mare. Not the best we have seen.

BOOKED: Micky Weir and Stuart Storer, both for dissent.

ENTERTAINMENT: Lifted out of the ordinary by Mick Harford's all-round display and hat-trick.



● **FINISHED:** Harford leaves his marker cold to complete his cup-tie hat-trick to finish off Wigan.