

STARS LOSING A LITTLE SHINE

THE DIFFICULTY of summing up a soccer team's performance, and the different views of it every fan has, was never more marked than in Luton Town's display at Fratton Park.

I was utterly depressed at the failure to take at least one point off the sort of team that needs to be held or beaten if you have real pretensions of doing well.

But manager Ray Harford saw signs to encourage him. The tactics are still evolving, and if the chances created had been converted it would have been a different story, he said.

Portsmouth boss Alan Ball was content because his midfield had run the show, in his view, with Mick Kennedy and Barry Horne carrying out instructions to clamp down on Ricky Hill and Danny Wilson.

Town chairman David Evans, never one to mince words, complained that there had been two or three no-hopers in the Luton side, plus a "so-called star or two" who hadn't starred at all.

I accept that we have to be patient while the new manager gets his team bedded in. But with a quarter of the season

over, and only one away win achieved against five defeats, he will run out of time if things are not improved in the very near future.

Mr Harford called it "a harsh result" which turned on the first goal.

I go some way with that view: both teams looked very poor and the one asked to chase an equaliser was always likely to be up against it.

Mr Harford was also right when he said: "We created more half-chances than we have done away in recent games.

"There was a spell when we started to get going and the passing was better. But it all changed when Portsmouth scored. We got impatient, and then we had a penalty given against us. We were chasing the game after that."

Mick Harford complained

that he was given wretched service. He had the beating of Malcolm Shotton and Kevin Ball in the air, but was given little chance to capitalise on that.

The Town's style, said the manager, was to try to thread the ball through into good attacking positions, and he added: "If you carry on playing like that you will get results."

He also made the point that the Town suffered miserable luck from the run of the ball in the penalty areas, and that was true.

One attack saw the woodwork hit twice, and dodgy goalkeeper Alan Knight worried his colleagues so much that they put men on the line between the posts every time danger threatened. Three desperate clearances prevented major embarrassment for Knight.

But by contrast the Town seemed to forget how to defend after Pompey sneaked the first goal, and six away games have now seen 12 goals conceded.

Portsmouth, with 14 against, are the only First Division side with a worse defensive away record — and that included six in one match, at Highbury.

Mr Harford's view that things will come right may be justified. But time might be the enemy in two ways.

It's not only the season that is getting older every week. So are players. Good teams need a blend of experience and youth, but perhaps the balance is shifting the wrong way in the Town's case.

Ashley Grimes was moved into the left midfield slot when David Preece was kept out again by injury. The idea was to give a better balance there.

Ron Johnson came in at left back and if Hilaire posed a few problems down that flank, the little winger spoiled it all by wasting the final cross.

On the Town's right Micky Weir had a similar sort of day. And Tim Breacker, ever willing to drive forward in attacking support, was punished when Portsmouth counter-attacked the hole he left behind him.

Foster, back on the ground where he started his career, cajoled and chivvied, but is not as quick as he used to be, and neither he nor Mal Donaghy could prevent two centre forwards, Baird and Paul Mariner, making decisive contributions to goals.

Les Sealey was blamed by Luton fans behind his goal for the long-range drive that beat him to set Portsmouth on the way.

Hill never looked like imposing himself on the midfield, and Brian Stein had an unhappy and ineffective afternoon, including a miss when

he should have equalised.

On the day, I thought the Town were one of two poor sides, in a match which took nearly an hour to spark into life.

Portsmouth were basic and uninspiring, but tackled hard on a pitch that was very soft but not waterlogged.

Twice in the first half the Town showed real class above anything that Pompey possessed.

In the 26th minute Foster floated a free kick from right to left. Harford headed the ball across the box and Weir's looping header beat Knight but bounced off the bar. Wilson, backing up strongly, rode two challenges to meet the rebound, and this time the post stopped the attempt.

The day's skill highlight came in the 39th minute when Hill and Stein produced a neat passing interchange, with Stein giving the ball to Harford a yard outside the penalty area.

The centre-forward saw Knight off his line, chipped him, but dropped the shot on to the top netting.

I have little doubt the Town would have won as easily as Portsmouth did if either of those chances had been turned into a goal.

Instead, a cruel reverse in the 55th minute settled it. Hill's overhead kick put Knight in trouble. He dropped the ball, and Weir and Harford both tried to force it through a panicky massed Portsmouth defence.

Pompey survived, Knight regained possession, and from his long punt Baird flicked the ball past Foster and Dillon raced through to bury the shot low past Sealey's left hand.

The goal brought the game to life and the equaliser should have come in the 62nd minute. Breacker roared down the right, crossed perfectly, and from somewhere near the

penalty spot Stein, unmarked, shot first-time over the bar.

A spell of Town attacking had Portsmouth on the ropes, but with little sign of a knock-out capability.

Knight was lucky when he parried Stein's cross-shot, with the ball rebounding inches short of the attempt Harford made to reach it at full stretch.

Referee Alf Buksh, who had turned down first half appeals when Breacker seemed to have been bundled off the ball in the Portsmouth penalty area, was more decisive in the 72nd minute with the award that put Portsmouth clear.

Dillon's through-ball caught the Town stretched, Hilaire went clear and as Sealey tried to smother the ball at the winger's feet Hilaire tumbled spectacularly.

Dillon converted the penalty, and nine minutes from time Dillon got down Portsmouth's left and crossed for Mariner to head the third.

Three minutes into stoppage time it was Portsmouth's turn to complain about a penalty, when Hill drove into a crowded goal area.

Pompey thought the ball hit Ball's hand and was not a deliberate act, and Shotton and Ball were both booked for dissent before Harford shot home a penalty which made no difference to the result.

Match details

PORTSMOUTH 3 LUTON TOWN 1 HALF-TIME 0-0

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Johnson (McDonough, 80 mins); Hill, Wilson, Grimes; Weir (Nwajobi, 80 mins), Brian Stein, Harford.

PORTSMOUTH: Knight; Swain, Shotton, Ball, Hardyman; Hilaire, Dillon, Horne, Kennedy; Baird (Mariner, 76 mins), Quinn. Other sub: Whitehead, not used.

THE GOALS: Kevin Dillon 25-yarder in off the post in the 55th minute; Dillon penalty, 72nd minute, after Vince Hilaire tumbled over Les Sealey; Paul Mariner, header, 81 minutes, from Dillon's left wing pull-back; Mick Harford, penalty for the Town, three minutes into injury time, after Ricky Hill drove a shot at Kevin Ball's hands.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved, nine wide, two hit the woodwork; Portsmouth four saved and five wide. Corners: 5-4 to Portsmouth.

ATTENDANCE: 12,391, Fratton Park's lowest league gate of the season, although it was a dismal wet day.

REFEREE: Alf Buksh, London — his decisions pleased neither team, and the penalty decisions were seen as harsh by both managers.

BOOKED: Ashley Grimes for a foul on Ian Baird; and Hilaire, Shotton and Ball of Portsmouth, all for dissent.

ENTERTAINMENT: Pompey fans loved it once the first goal had decided the result. The Town's small following was in despair.