

Nice points — shame about the game . . .

87/88

AT LEAST the old year crept out with a victory at Kenilworth Road, but there was precious little beyond the result for Town fans to enjoy as the earlier defeat at Selhurst Park was avenged.

The Town's team performance was not as good as it had been when losing at Everton, yet Charlton were so poor as an attacking outfit that one goal was always enough, as manager Lenne Lawrence admitted.

His team, fighting against relegation, had gone through December without a single league defeat, but he had no doubts that the right team were winners on Monday.

As a spectacle for a bank holiday crowd it was a big let-down, with the home fans frustrated by the Town's inability to get into gear, and not too pleased at what looked like an offside trap.

Manager Ray Harford denies that the Town set the trap, and says it is simply common sense to push up behind clearances to press home attacks at the other end.

A NONSENSE

Every team does it, and Mr Lawrence, remarkably cheerful and honest, agreed with the Town boss. "We defended competently enough," he said. "But once Luton's goal went in I couldn't see any other result but a win for Luton."

"I think 80 per cent of our attacks finished up as offside, and that's a nonsense. You expect forwards to have the nous to work it out."

"It wasn't even a case of being caught by a couple of feet, or by a dodgy linesman. Time and again we had two or three men anything up to seven or eight yards offside."

"You expect it to take 20 minutes or so to work out the other team's tactics . . . but we were still getting caught at the end as well as at the beginning. You have got to be able to avoid that, and we couldn't."

"And when we did, everything seemed to fall on Steve Foster's head . . . except when it fell at his feet. Long before the end I was just hoping that we would put the ball anywhere where Steve Foster wasn't!"

Foster and Mal Donaghy blotted out Charlton's attack so effectively that Les Sealey did not have a serious save to make.

The trouble was that the same was almost true of Bob Bolder as the game got bogged down in an overcrowded midfield.

LUTON TN 1 CHARLTON 0

The town suffered another attack of nerves in their efforts to please, and it got to the point where they were apparently frightened of slowing it down and playing an extra pass.

Mistakes were the routine, despite a lot of good creative work by Mick Harford. His running, down the middle and into space on the flanks, was more fluent than we have seen for a long time.

He made the goal, was foiled by a brilliant save, and came within an inch or two of converting a second-half cross with a one-man display of attacking skill.

The rest was not too pretty, with too many Town players threatening plenty and achieving little. There were few highlights, although the goal that avenged the September defeat was well made and expertly taken.

Harford had conjured up an astonishing lob in the 35th minute from Foster's long headed clearance. The ball looked like beating Bob Bolder, but he stretched acrobatically to finger-tip it away.

Five minutes later Mark Stein attacked down the left, crossed to the far side of the penalty area, and Harford, inevitably, rose above everyone to get the knockdown. Danny Wilson buried the shot from the edge of the box, and we confidently expected the Town to settle after that.

But the stalemate, each side making mistakes in turn, continued, although the Town looked the more likely to score.

SO NEAR . . .

Harford beat Peter Shirtliff for pace but lobbed agonisingly wide, than almost made perfect contact at full stretch to a low diagonal cross by Mark Stein.

That effort also flashed off target, with Charlton baffled by Harford's speedy arrival and certain that it should have been another offside.

Mr Lawrence sent on both his subs in a vain attempt to put a bit of life into his dummies, but they still looked candidates for a shop window rather than for the First Division.

Sadly, the Town were unable to tear them apart as they would have done with anything approaching normal form.

The best moved involved Harford and Wilson combining to get Tim Breacker down the right. His cross was spot-on. Brian Stein met it perfectly, and Bolder made another top class save to tip the header away for a fruitless corner.



● POISE: Brian Stein on the ball against Charlton.

The encouraging result for the Town was that poor performance or not, the points hoisted them back into the top half of the table, and Rob Johnson slotted in well as replacement for injured Ashley Grimes.

"At least he passed the ball," said his manager, with a mixture of admiration for him and disappointment at some of his colleagues.

THE MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Johnson; Wilson, McDonough, Allinson; Brian Stein, Mark Stein, Harford. Subs: Black and Oldfield, not needed.

CHARLTON: Bolder; Humphrey, Shirtliff, Thompson, Reid; Campbell, Mortimer, Stuart (Bennett, 53 mins), Mackenzie; Williams (Lee, 53 mins), Jones.

THE GOAL: Danny Wilson, low drive, 40th minute, from Mick Harford's knock-down.

OTHER STRIKES: Town three saved and eight wide. Charlton two saved and three wide. Corners 8-5 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 7,243, a drop of 2,000 on Charlton's visit last season.

REFEREE: Ian Borrett, Harlestone. Had an easy afternoon, save for a lot of whistle for offside against both attacks.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very poor, with Charlton having nothing in attack, and the Town unable to string decent passing moves together because of over-anxiety. The confidence to play an extra pass when it was needed vanished.