

CLASS BEATS HONEST TOIL

87/88 (FAC)
Reports by Brian Swain. Pictures: Josh Levy

FIRST DIVISION composure and quality overcame Fourth Division muscle and passion as Luton Town came through a potentially difficult cup-tie at Hartlepool more easily than the result suggests.

A win by any margin has to be welcome, in a round where cup shocks are normally certain to happen somewhere. My only complaint is that it should have been more emphatic.

But there can be no complaints at all about the way the Town tackled the task at a windswept Victoria Ground packed with passionate — and to some extent bigoted — locals who were determined to enjoy their biggest soccer occasion for a decade.

It was not a pretty match, but full of cup-tie hustle and bustle from Hartlepool as they tried to cover skill deficiencies with physical effort and commitment.

It needed strong men to hold them, and eventually an extra yard of pace and a touch of First Division talent to beat them.

Professional preparation also played an important part. Manager Ray Harford — he, Danny Wilson and Ian Allinson were the only members of the Town party with experience of playing on the tiny ground — began it all long before kick-off.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SCORE

He laid it on thick about how primitive the ground and its facilities were. He told his players that the dressing rooms were so awful that the last time Hartlepool had a big match visitors Leeds refused to use them. They changed at a hotel half a mile away and walked to the game in their tracksuits.

Half the Town side would not have been surprised to see tin baths brought into the wooden huts that serve as Hartlepool's dressing room and boardroom area.

"When we got to the ground the players looked around and said it was nothing like as bad as they thought it would be," said the canny manager later.

That helped to give the Town a pre-match lift and Hartlepool boss John Bird said later that Steve Foster's winning of the toss was the second bonus.

"We wanted to play with the wind behind us in the first half," he said. "We wanted to pile in at Luton. And I wanted the rain to keep on after it started a few minutes before kick-off. It could have been another day when the

cup is a great leveller.

"I am very disappointed with the result because there wasn't much in it, and I really expected us to win.

"When it was 0-0 at half-time I said to my coach that if we could hold it at that for another 20 minutes we would do it. But Luton scored early in the second half and we didn't play as well as we can. We were in too much of a hurry.

"Luton were very fluid, and the big difference between the top divisions and the rest is that lower down you make mistakes and they go unnoticed. We made a couple in defence and Luton took advantage. But I can't fault my lads for total effort and commitment."

The crowd's reaction at the final whistle showed that they too appreciated the strenuous efforts Hartlepool had made. Mr Baird was disappointed that his men stayed to take an ovation — "You'd think they had won. How could they celebrate being beaten?"

His summing up was inevitably biased. It ignored the fact that Mark and Brian Stein netted twice in the last two minutes of the first half, and even the local Pressmen thought both were good goals. Referee Kevin Breen of Liverpool mystified everyone with decisions to award fouls, although Town boss Harford later confirmed he was right both times.

NOT TESTED

Mr Bird's version of events also failed to take into account the fact that Les Sealey was not seriously tested once, while Ian Allinson was denied a goal by a superb headed clearance by Tony Smith and the Stein brothers both missed chances they would normally put away with ease. Had they been taken it would have been 5-1 to the Town.

There was also a lot of doubt about Hartlepool's consolation goal, with Andy Toman looking well offside, but it came too late to affect the result.

The only time the Town defence was in any real danger was in the first 20 minutes, when the crowd was screaming in a frenzy of optimism. Every throw-in won by Hartlepool was greeted with a roar of encouragement. When they won a corner I half-expected a pitch invasion of celebration.

Sadly, beneath it all, there was also a nasty venom in

the air from a minority of home fans. Bananas were thrown onto the pitch by men with brains so small they did not realise that it would simply make the Town more determined.

And the willingness to battle, as well as play, was a crucial ingredient as Hartlepool were eventually exposed as honest Fourth Division toilers.

UNFLINCHING GRAFT

A cutting gale swept in from the North Sea — you could sit in the stand and watch the fishing boats tossing around on the waves just the other side of the dug-outs — and the pitch was a mixture of sponge-like mud and bumps.

Foster and Mal Donaghy were my men of the match, with both quite superb in snuffing out the muscular threat of 20-goal Paul Baker.

Every single member of the Town side got his head down and grafted, and found the courage to be unflinching when crude intimidation was occasionally introduced.

The home fans could hardly believe it when the Town met fire with fire. I thought the ref let a little too much go, and agreed with his yellow cards for Darron McDonough and Brian Honour, both for fouls.

The Town manager picked out Mark Stein as his man of the match. "He was really top class — probably his best performance since I have been here," said Mr Harford.

That praise was well-earned, but I thought the whole team played a part, and certainly there was more invention and enterprise about the Town attacks. And that was despite the limitations caused by Mick Harford's suspension.

PLOUGHING ON

Micky Weir was recalled to be a central attacker, which gave the Town a decidedly pint-sized front line against a team of comparative giants.

But skill more than compensated, and it was also noticeable that the Town kept ploughing through the mud until the 90th minute.

The only goalmouth excitement at close quarters was in front of Kevin Carr, who was beaten twice in the last two minutes of the first half.

Tim Breacker's overlap led to the first major let-off. From his cross Danny Wilson thumped a shot at goal, with Mark Stein diverting it into the net. The ref ruled it out for a push on a defender.

Within 60 seconds, in the 44th minute, Ian Allinson's corner led to a scramble which ended with Brian Stein shooting in from close range, but the ref said Carr had been fouled in the melee.

"I was a little worried at half-time that we might have missed our chance," said Mr Harford. "But then we scored at exactly the right time and I knew we were OK."

The goal came when Foster went up to give the attack

Match details

HARTLEPOOL 1 LUTON TOWN 2
Half-time: 0-0

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

HARTLEPOOL: Carr; Barratt, Smith, Haigh, McKinnon; Nobbs, Toman, Gibb (Tinkler, 58 mins); Honour, Baker, Whellans. Other sub; Bor-thwick, not used.

THE GOALS: Micky Weir, 49th minute, from hard low cross by Danny Wilson; Darron McDonough, 25-yard curler into far corner from Ian Allinson lay-back.

OTHER STRIKES: Town three saved, eight wide, two netted and disallowed for fouls; Hartlepool two saved, four wide. Corners: 10-3 to the Town.

REFEREE: Kevin Breen, Liverpool — baffled a lot of people when he ruled out two "goals" but Ray Harford confirms he was right both times.

BOOKED: Darron McDonough of the Town and Brian Honour of Hartlepool, both for fouls.

ATTENDANCE: 6,056, double Hartlepool's average, and including 900 from Luton, which left 500 Luton tickets unsold.

ENTERTAINMENT: A full-blooded cup-tie with the Fourth Division side offering guts and determination, with a dash of truculence and the Town deserving to win through standing up to the physical assault and then imposing their quality on proceedings.