THRILLER BOOKS WEMBLEY PLACE

MANAGER RAY Harford hardly knew Report: Brian Swain. Pictures: Josh Levy whether to laugh or cry after Saturday's memorable 11-goal extravaganza against Oxford.

It took Luton Town's run to eight games without defeat, and wrapped up a place at Wembley in the Mercantile Credit Centenary tournament, a week before the Littlewoods Cup final.

"To look on the positive side, the finishing was incredible," he said. "Apart from the seven that went in we hit the post twice and had a couple kicked off the line.

"But we will be asking questions about how Oxford were able to score four . . . I know the fans enjoyed themselves, and so did I. But I would rather us win 3-0 than 7-4 from the point of view of being a good professional. I have said that I-would be prepared to open it up and risk conceding goals so long as we are sure we can score more. But that was a bit ridiculous.

DAY TO ENJOY

"It was one of those freak occasions. If we had thought we would let in four goals, how would the attack feel knowing they had to get five to win?

"But didn't they do it magnificently? It was a day to enjoy our goals, and worry about theirs later.

"Oxford were very brave in their approach. They used a sweeper but pushed up the fullbacks and it opened up the game.

"They had a left-winger, Peter Rhoades-Brown, at left back, and he and Tim Breacker had half the field to themselves at times on attack and counter-attack. Oxford were brave and ambitious, but they were up against a very good side on the day."

Maurice Evans, struggling to keep Oxford in the First Division while they bid to go to Wembley at the Town's expense, confessed to being shell-shocked by what he had seen. And he promised that several of his players would be "shaken up" before last night's Littlewoods Cup semi-final.

He was even more concerned than Mr Harford about the powder-puff defending that gave forwards a field day. Oxford missed suspended left back John Dreyer and

injured defender Neil Slatter. The defeat dropped them down to 20th place in the table, their lowest of the season.

Yet Mr Harford saw occasional reasons to worry as Oxford threatened to come back after being two down in the first 20 minutes. It was only 3-2 at half-time and the Town manager admitted: "I was worried about what might have happened if they had got an equaliser early in the second half."

A hamstring injury to Rob Johnson led to Oxford's second goal, and the left back missed the second half, to give Ashley Grimes valuable match practice.

It was rousing, and sometimes knockabout stuff, as the two teams pounded away at each other, always seeking to attack and leaving themselves wide open in defence.

Mark Stein rattled in the first league hat-trick of his career in an 11-minute spell early in the second half and rightly received the sponsor's man of the match award.

When he was a puny-looking youngster in the reserves I recall David Pleat telling me that one day Mark would be even better than his brother Brian. It seemed like asking a man to jump for the moon at the time, but what a bonus it will be if the 22-year-old continues current progress.

He was doubly delighted with his performance because he had gone four games without a goal. His hat-trick took his season's tally to eight, one fewer than his brother.

Mick Harford's brace took his total to 15, and Darron McDonough's four is a significant statistic. Peter Nicholas scored one in his 102 league games for the Town.

Mark Stein made a telling point: "We're capable of getting goals from all positions."

And like everyone else in the Town camp he insisted that one freak league game was not a pointer to a twolegged cup semi-final.

"The lads were quite shocked about this game... but we all enjoyed it. But Oxford could have scored about eight and we could have had twelve."

As well as 11 goals, we saw an Oxford corner by Gary Shelton deflected onto the outside of a post. Mark Stein hit the woodwork when the Town were leading 2-0, and McDonough did the same when it was 5-2.

Steve Hardwick, despite being beaten seven times, made a couple of good saves, and Les Sealey, who was sometimes left in isolation as the Town charged upfield, made a vital stop from Hill's header which would have

made it 6-5. On top of all that both sides saw shots cleared off the line in a match which delighted the TV companies who were sending pictures to around 200 million people all

round the world.

The choice was not a fluke — they had chosen the Town's 5-2 win at the Manor Ground for similar treatment in September.

The score details:

- 1-0: Rob Johnson and Mark Stein combine to work the ball to Mick Harford in the sixth minute. A left foot curler from the inside left angle of the penalty area swings beyond Hardwick into the far corner.
- 2-0: Harford's turn and flick releases Tim Breacker down the right in the 20th minute, and from his cross Brian Stein heads home.
- 2-1: Martin Foyle crosses from the right to beyond the far post in the 34th minute. Breacker handles as he challenges Dean Saunders for the header. Saunders scores from the penalty.
- 3-1: Breacker, who had a storming match, makes another strong run and cross down the right. Harford's header is blocked and McDonough keeps calm, waits for the ball to drop, and smashes in a deliberate volley, ten minutes before the interval.
- 3-2: David Bardsley goes down Oxford's right and Johnson, hobbling through injury, is unable to prevent the deep cross. Martin Foyle takes his time, controls the ball and cracks in a beauty four minutes from half-time.

WRIGGLING THROUGH

- 4-2: Oxford pressure is relieved by Sealey's 51stminute clearance. McDonough flicks on and Mark Stein wriggles through like a ferret down a rabbit hole to shoot past Hardwick.
- 5-2: Steve Foster heads on a 53rd-minute corner by Grimes and Mark Stein nips in for a scoring header.
- 5-3: Richard Hill feints to pass to Foyle, who looks offside, but lumbers through on his own and gives Oxford renewed hope in the 61st minute.
- 6-3: Brian Stein waltzes to the by-line on the right, and pulls back a perfect pass. Mark Stein lashes in a shot to complete an 11-minute hat-trick.
- 6-4: Hill breaks through on his own again, in the 65th minute. Sealey blocks his effort this time, but Les Phillips fires a neat lob 25 yards into the net. The Town defence is still on walkabout upfield at the time.
- 7-4: Breacker, still full of running in the 71st minute, charges forward again, crosses to the far post, and Harford heads his second.

For sheer entertainment, it was a day to remember for ever — and Oxford United played their part to the full.