

Injured pride given a tonic

87/88

AFTER DEEP discussions about pride, in themselves, their profession and their club, Luton Town players stepped out at Kenilworth Road on Tuesday night on a hiding to nothing.

Their abject performance at Wembley on Sunday led to the season's second-lowest gate for a First Division match, but Portsmouth were trounced just as completely as the Town had been by Reading.

And for the last half hour the old Luton Town sparkle returned as relegation-threatened visitors were seen off with a late flourish.

It might not have been enough to wipe out all memories of the Simod Cup fiasco, but at least it showed that Luton Town are still capable of doing well at home.

The trick now, suggested manager Ray Harford, is to build on the renewal of confidence and do it away from Kenilworth Road as well, starting at Newcastle on Saturday.

And we ought not to forget that Portsmouth were a poor side, yet might have caused the fans an uncomfortable last five minutes if they hadn't wasted a penalty.

My darkest worry was that Reading might have done irreparable harm to the Town's confidence. Portsmouth gave everyone a chance to prove otherwise.

With Mick Harford out because of flu, the Town used Ian Allinson in attack and recalled Rob Johnson on the right of midfield.

Allinson is still fighting to recapture the form he showed in his early days with the Town, but Johnson once again showed real professionalism in the way he responded to a rare opportunity. Few deserve a Littlewoods Cup final medal more than he.

The defence, harried much less than they had been by Reading, kept their shape better, and Danny Wilson was the crucial link between back and front.

He had a part in three of the Town's goals, was always hungry for the ball and did more than most to wipe out Wembley heartbreak memories.

With five regulars missing, Portsmouth did well to hold it to one goal by half-time, and then to snatch an equaliser.

Manager Alan Ball blamed his men for not doing the "bread and butter" things like defending at corners and free kicks. And he said it was easy for the Town to turn on the style in the last half-hour when they were 3-1 up.

Perhaps so, but as Mr Harford pointed out, work had to be done to make the 3-1 platform a reality. The victory gave him a lift and he is now beginning to think about one more before starting experiments in the team with next season in mind.

Match details

LUTON TN 4 PORTSMOUTH 1
(HALF-TIME: 1-0)

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Grimes; Johnson, McDonough, Wilson; B. Stein, M. Stein, Allinson. Subs: Oldfield and Black.

POMPEY: Knight; Swain, Blake, Gilbert, Sandford; Dillon, Horne, Fillery; Perry (Kerr, 64 mins), Mariner, Hilaire. Other sub: Diash.

THE GOALS: Danny Wilson, 25-yard free kick, 8th minute; Kevin Dillon for Portsmouth, 52nd minute; Mark Stein, 53rd minute; Paul Mariner, own goal, 63rd minute; Brian Stein, 86th minute.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved, three wide and one hit a post; Portsmouth two saved and five, including a penalty, wide. Corners: 4-2 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 6,740. Where were the rest of the 30,000 who bought Littlewoods Cup final tickets?

REFEREE: Vic Callow, Solihull.

ENTERTAINMENT: Just what we needed after Sunday.

Wilson set the ball rolling with a 25-yard free kick in the eighth minute, with Mr Ball complaining that goalkeeper Alan Knight was at fault.

He might have considered Billy Gilbert's part in the goal, he had been booked after only two minutes for a foul on Allinson, and risked a red card for another on Mark Stein. He got away with a lecture, until Wilson dispensed further punishment by scoring from the free kick.

The energetic midfielder cracked another 25-yarder against a post, and it was a shock when Vince Hilaire got clear down the left to lay on an equaliser for Kevin Dillon seven minutes into the second half.

But within 60 seconds Mark Stein forced Portsmouth to concede a corner on the Town's right. Steve Foster headed on Wilson's kick, and Stein got his 12th goal of the season.

Ten minutes later Wilson slung over a corner from the left, to beyond the far post, and Paul Mariner, trying to mark Foster, headed a peach of a goal into his own net.

Portsmouth looked well beaten from then on, but six minutes from time Tim Breacker was adjudged to have tripped Hilaire. Justice was done, to Town eyes, when Dillon crashed the penalty wide and two minutes later Brian Stein marked the resurgence of his form with a solo run and crisp shot for the Town's fourth.