

BOSS GETS THE SHAPE HE WANTS

AS A LONG SEASON ended in the Sunday sunshine of Nottingham, manager Ray Harford was already looking ahead with relish to the new campaign. 87/88

The draw against Forest, earned by resilient defence, sensible passing and another cracking goal by David Oldfield, encouraged him when he looked back at the Town's major failing this season.

Their away record, three wins, five draws and 12 defeats was the third worst in the First Division. Even relegated Portsmouth and Watford managed 15 away points each, one more than the Town.

Yet, if the Littlewoods Cup Wembley game is included in the away matches since a defeat at Old Trafford a month ago, the recent run is only one defeat, at Spurs, on six trips.

At Nottingham we saw the shape of things to come, with a four-man midfield asked to think first about helping the defence, and to take the sting out of the opposition on the edge of the final third of the field.

For counter-attacks, the pattern demands speedy work on the flanks in particular, and if that was not entirely top notch at the City Ground, the general game plan worked a treat.

Compared to Friday's match, the Town left out Ashley Grimes, Mick Harford, Mal Donaghy and Kingsley Black.

Rob Johnson reverted to left back, Marvin Johnson returned alongside Steve Foster, and Gary Cobb and Ian Allinson joined Danny Wilson and David Preece in midfield, with Mark Stein recalled to partner David Oldfield in attack.

Foster emerged as man of the match with a commanding presence that was remarkable for a man of 30, playing in hot sunshine on a day when the result mattered little.

Marvin Johnson had his best game yet, and while Forest had enough of the play to have been winners, they were fortunate in the last 15 minutes when they might have conceded another goal.

The change to 4-4-2, without the luxury of a Brian Stein "in the hole" behind a front pair, has stopped the Town behind a soft touch in away games.

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While supporters at Nottingham were impressed by the determined hard work of the back four, the manager said: "It was not only a case of resilient defending. The midfield played their part, and some of their passing was excellent. And we hit hard on the break — the goal by David Oldfield was another smasher."

That strike had caught Forest unawares after only 88 seconds of play. Mark Stein won the ball against Neil Webb near the half-way line, pushed a pass down the middle, and Oldfield's pace and accurate low shot did the rest. And once again it turned out to be a bit of a rarity — a Town shot on target.

Forest had far more, but few were from close quarters, and Andy Dibble had a comparatively easy ride.

Another pleasant surprise was the full commitment that went into the Town's 58th game of the season. David Preece and Tim Breacker picked up bookings for being over-enthusiastic in tackles on Nigel Clough and Lee Glover.

Danny Wilson buzzed on defensive duties to help blunt Forest's attacking endeavours, and the back nine, so to speak, was united in working as a team. Oldfield and Stein also did their parts in dropping back to relieve pressure.

Brian Clough tried two men against Rob Johnson. Franz Carr played the first half and Gary Crosby the second, wide on Forest's right. Both had plenty of pace, and threatened a lot, but achieved little at the end of it.

Crosby's early efforts produced four corners in the first five minutes of the second half, but the biggest scare to the Town came from Glover on the other flank. Forest and their fans were getting frustrated at their inability to turn possession into goals when they almost scored with a fluke.

Glover got down the left, thumped in a hard low cross, and the deflection off Rob Johnson forced Dibble to twist acrobatically to prevent an own goal.

Right back Gary Fleming joined an attack and his persistence led to the 60th-minute equaliser. His run was halted, but the ball fell to Terry Wilson on the edge of the area. He had shot over from a similar position a few minutes earlier. This time he chose to lay off a short square pass for Neil Webb to meet with a sweet curling shot into the corner of the net for the game's second quality goal.

Forest's elation produced a few hectic moments in the Town goalmouth. Foster put a clearance onto the top of the bar and from the corner Breacker cleared off the line from Webb.

But the Forest fire died, and the Town put fresh energy into the game, and Kingsley Black going on as sub for the tiring and bustling Preece, and Julian James replacing Cobb, who had not made a major impact.

The changes almost brought the fourth away win the Town boss wanted, because they were much the sharper attacking side in the last 15 minutes.

Oldfield, helping out in defence, was nearly knocked out when his face got in the way of a shot by Clough. The rebound went to Black, and he led a break down the left before feeding Allinson on the right. The cross was too deep, but James managed to retrieve it beyond the far post and head back to Mark Stein, whose rising drive from the edge of the area clipped the bar with Steve Sutton groping.

THE MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Dibble; Breacker, Foster, M. Johnson, R. Johnson; Cobb (James, 72 mins), Allinson, Wilson, Preece (Black, 67 mins); Oldfield, M. Stein.

FOREST: Sutton; Fleming, Walker, Foster, Chettle; Carr (Crosby, 45 mins), Wilson, Webb, Rice; Clough, Glover. Other sub: Parker, not used.

THE GOALS: David Oldfield for the Town, solo run and shot, after 1min 22secs; Neil Webb for Forest, 60th minute, curled shot from the edge of the box.

OTHER STRIKES: Town two saved, four wide, one clipped the bar; Forest eight saved, four wide, one hit the bar. Corners: 14-0 to Forest.

ATTENDANCE: 13,106.

REFEREE: Brian Stevens, Stonehouse.

ENTERTAINMENT: Remarkably good, on a hot sunny afternoon when both teams got on with the game and put plenty of effort into it.