

BRAVE DEFENCE IS NOT ENOUGH

88/89

HEROIC DEFENCE in face of a non-stop long-ball powerful barrage of attacks was the only decent contribution Luton Town were able to make to their first league game of the season.

Sheffield Wednesday, themselves short of attackers, won with a goal scored by a right back playing as a makeshift centre-forward.

On the amount of pressure they exerted they deserved the points. They had a penalty saved and hit the woodwork twice, while the Town hardly ever threatened to pierce the Wednesday defence.

Manager Ray Harford took pleasure from the way his side battled against adversity, with Steve Foster and Mal Donaghy outstanding against a battering ram of physical power which put them under pressure for almost the whole 90 minutes.

A poor referee helped neither side and six bookings, five of them against the Town, were no reflection of the way the game was played.

PATIENCE NEEDED

On its first league appearance, the Town's new formation was set major problems, and the team and manager deserve more than one match before any judgement can be made.

If Wimbledon are walloped at Kenilworth Road on Saturday, it will be no more a vindication of the manager's ideas than the defeat at Sheffield was.

But there obviously must be a variation in the way the system is operated, in home and away games.

On a beautiful lush green grass pitch at Hillsborough Wednesday played high-speed long passes, and were sharper and more physical than the Town.

Kingsley Black and Roy Wegerle were all too often forlorn and forgotten figures in midfield, waiting hopefully for passes out of defence that rarely arrived. When they did, both missed chances that might have brought goals to destroy Wednesday's confidence.

The Town needed a goal on the break, but too often the defence had no time to do anything but hack the ball away in haste instead of stroking it clear to colleagues.

Danny Wilson beavered away to be the best midfielder on the park, but Steve Williams on his Luton debut was by-passed by most of the helter-skelter action.

He was one of several who had no time to get hold of the ball. Wednesday hit it long, knocked it down, and chased like demons.

For nearly an hour the Town held out, but the pressure was so consistent that I felt a goal had to be conceded, and that if and when it happened the game would be all over.

Report: Brian Swain — pictures: Josh Levy

Mick Harford had to go wandering and drop off deep to try to find some sort of service. David Oldfield, with less experience to call on, was unable to get into the game to any real extent.

LATE CHANGE

Wegerle's unhappy debut ended in substitution, but that was no reflection on his first outing. Ian Allinson was introduced for the last 20 minutes, after the Town had fallen behind, and Black was pushed further upfield to be more of an attacker.

Tim Breacker and John Dreyer were worked hard, and at times discomforted by brute force yet, for all Wednesday's possession and powerplay Les Sealey had only one hard save to make apart from the goal.

That was from a 33rd-minute penalty, in a flurry which had the Town furious with referee George Tyson. The pattern of play was well set by then. Wednesday had attacked without much flair, the Town had defended calmly, and Wednesday had been let off a couple of times when they were caught on the break.

Wegerle had come nearest to scoring, robbing Gary Megson and racing clear before firing inches wide, and then going clear from a Williams pass but being robbed by a goalkeeper's tackle outside the box.

Sterland, an international class right back used as a striker after the departure of leading scorer Lee Chapman, had headed weakly from the far post in Wednesday's best threat.

Flashpoint came when Tony Galvin had a run down Wednesday's left, and charged straight into Breacker. He knocked the full-back down, tripped over him, and saw the ball break to Nigel Worthington.

With the Town fans expecting a free kick, Worthington knocked over a low cross to Sterland, on the edge of the penalty area. Dreyer took the ball off him, Sterland dived face down, and Mr Tyson gave a penalty.

The Town were incensed, with Dreyer's tackle looking clean and effective, and Mr Tyson booked Breacker for dissent before things calmed down.

PENALTY SAVED

Sterland took the kick, hit it with too little power and precision, and Sealey dived to his left to make the save look easy.

I thought back to the Town's previous visit to Hillsborough when Colin West hit a penalty from the same spot over the bar, and wondered if the repeat failure might turn the game. But it didn't.

Sterland's next act, from the corner, was to jump in

feet first as Sealey made the catch, and although the free kick was given the Wednesday man's petulance brought no other action from Mr Tyson.

You could sense the simmering discontent for several minutes after that, but the Town regained their collective defensive calm and although West hit the top of the bar with a 38th-minute shot there were no other serious alarms before the interval.

Another chance to break the pattern came for the Town early in the second half, when Oldfield and Black swapped passes in a quick break. But Black, having got into a good position, shot wide of the far post.

Wednesday resumed their barrage to force the Town to play deep defence. West hit a snap-shot straight at Sealey, and Worthington tried a 20-yard curler which was saved easily.

But with the crowd roaring on all-action Wednesday, Sterland had his compensation for missing the penalty in the 58th minute.

He sent Siggie Jonsson away down the right, Dreyer was cut out, Foster tried to cover, and from the quick cross Sterland headed the winner from five or six yards.

YELLOW CARD RASH

The major characteristic of the match after that was Mr Tyson's contribution. Yellow cards waved for Black, harshly for a foul; Harford, ludicrously for going for a waist-high ball Lawrie Madden was trying to head; Foster, unbelievably, for agreeing with an offside decision the same way others had done throughout the match by clapping, and Donaghy, rightly, for handball to cut off a through-pass over his head.

Donaghy, injured above and below the belt by not flinching in the face of fierce physical challenges, blocked a drive by West which might have brought a second goal, and Sterland mucked up another chance by getting too close to the target — Sealey deflected the shot onto the post.

GREATER THREAT

But that was indicative of Wednesday's greater threat as attackers — it brought their 17th corner of the game. The Town had none in the first half, and just two in the second.

I suspect the only firm conclusion to be drawn from the first 90 minutes is that with Foster and Donaghy in form, the Town's defence will be as good as most in the First Division.

If we can just get the attack to reach the same standard, there will be better performances, and better results.

Match details

SHEFFIELD WED.....1
LUTON TOWN.....0

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Dreyer; Wegerle (Allinson, 72 mins), Wilson, Williams, Black; Harford, Oldfield. Other sub: Rob Johnson, not used.

WEDNESDAY: Pressman; Worthington, Pearson, Madden, Proctor; Megson, Harper, Jonsson, Galvin (Hirst, 77 mins); West, Sterland. Other sub: Bradshaw, not used.

THE GOAL: Mel Sterland, 58th minute, near post header from cross from right by Siggie Jonsson.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town two saved and four wide; Wednesday seven saved, including a penalty by Sterland, and 11 wide. Corners: 17-2 to Wednesday.

ATTENDANCE: 16,433, 500 down on the Town's Hillsborough visit last season.

REFEREE: George Tyson, Sunderland. Diabolical. Booked Nigel Pearson, for holding David Oldfield, plus Breacker, Black, Harford, Foster and Donaghy.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good exciting stuff for the home fans, but the quality of football was not high and there is a limit to how much appreciation you can have for a marvellous Town defensive battle when you lose by one goal.