

CHAMPIONS ARE THE ALSO-RANS

THE COVETED first home win of the season for Luton Town could scarcely have been sweeter. League champions Liverpool were the victims, beaten by a mixture of determined grit by the Town defence and their own poor finishing.

Mick Harford put the Town on their way with his first goal of the season, with the game less than three minutes old.

It set up a classic confrontation, with the Liverpool mean machine threatening to hit top gear before being snuffed out, and forced to accept being second best on the day.

Few teams will stand up to the remorseless pressure the champions exert as well as the Town did.

HEROIC DEFENCE

Steve Foster and Mal Donaghy were heroic in central defence. Rob Johnson had the nerve to defend well and move forward to prompt counter-attacks, and John Dreyer continues to look better and more composed with every game.

Midfield was a mixture. Over the 90 minutes Liverpool probably had the better of that department, and while the fans were groaning at some of the ambitious passes Steve Williams tried, he won a vote of confidence later from his manager and his chairman.

Those of us who went to Everton saw how Williams can boss games. One pass can turn defence into instant attack. Mr Harford made the point that in home games Williams has to modify his game.

The alternative is for other players to modify theirs to make the best use of Williams. Chairman David Evans believes a compromise between the two options will work best.

Forwards, he said, will benefit hugely as they appreciate, and anticipate, the service that will come their way from the midfielder.

I thought the Town suffered by comparison with Peter Beardsley, and Ray Houghton to a lesser degree.

But Liverpool had no-one to compare with Harford's mixture of power and control on a day when Ian Rush was a forlorn lonely figure trying to jump into Mal Donaghy's pocket, and John Barnes threatened so much and achieved so little.

Barnes had enough chances to have won the game on his own, with the Town struggling in the first 20 minutes to stay in the game despite their early goal.

Beardsley had shot weakly at Les Sealey in the first minute, when a punted clearance by stand-in goalkeeper Mike Hooper caught the Town dozing at the back.

But with less than three minutes played the biggest attendance of the season was in raptures. Steve Nicol held David Oldfield to impede the striker's attempt to turn and move goalwards.

Williams took the free kick, and the hours of training ground work paid a handsome dividend. The Town threw in early runners to sell a dummy to the Liverpool defence. Harford made a later run, found a yard of space, and carefully headed into the far corner.

Not so long ago a goal that early would have been disastrous. I remember Brian Stein proving the point three years ago. He scored first, and Liverpool simply rolled forward to recover and win.

RESILIENT DEFENCE

This time, with the Town more resilient defensively, and well disciplined once they had weathered the storm of the first 20 minutes, it was Liverpool's turn to suffer the frustration we have experienced this season.

Beardsley, Houghton, McDonald and Barnes looked real championship quality as they mounted attacks. But the final shot was Fourth Division, with Barnes producing the miss of the match three minutes after the Town had scored.

He was unmarked five yards from goal to meet a perfect cross by McDonald, but side-footed over the bar.

Rush, looking like a Cornetto salesman waiting for customers, knocked a half-chance wide and the Town slowly recovered composure so well that Sealey was never seriously troubled.

He had one moment of worry when a short corner routine gave Houghton a shooting chance. Sealey blocked it, and then gratefully grabbed the shot from the rebound, struck ineffectively by Barnes.

INCISIVE MOOD

If the Town did less of the attacking, they were certainly incisive every now and again, with slick passing moves.

Hooper had to fly across goal to keep out a cleverly-flighted chip shot from the left by Kingsley Black, and in the second half Oldfield did well to get on the end of a sweeping movement engineered by Wilson, Hill and Johnson. He shot wide.

Liverpool pressed forward for most of the second half, with the Town gaining in confidence as the minutes ticked away.

But it was hard on the nerves, with even manager Ray Harford sniffing the tension that went round the ground as we wondered if Liverpool really could be kept out by defiance and organisation.

The champions' nearest smell of a point came with ten minutes to go, when Sealey spread himself to make an easy save when Rush found himself free for half a second in sight of goal.

It was ironic that Liverpool's horrifying injury list has not yet overtaken their strikers. John Aldridge was left on the bench to accommodate Rush's return on a day when Gary Gillespie became the sixth member of the squad to go onto the Anfield sick list.

CARRIED OFF

He was carried off with a knee ligament injury after a collision with Foster, forcing Liverpool to reorganise their defence.

But by that time the Town had already taken the lead, and in fact the reshaped back four did Liverpool proud.

Roy Wegerle was sent on for the tiring Oldfield with 22 minutes to go, but was not able to cash in. He was

close to good shooting positions twice without being able to find the final touch.

Ricky Hill, a familiar face in an unfamiliar role, suffered the same fate in his job behind Harford and Oldfield.

Any victory over Liverpool is a "never mind the quality feel the lovely result" kind of day. This was no exception to that. You can play lovely flowing football against the Anfield men. I have seen the Town do it lots of times, and lose in the process.

If there were minor shortcomings on Saturday, any bunch of men who can get an early goal against Liverpool, then protect the lead for 88 minutes, will do for me.

Match details

LUTON TN 1 LIVERPOOL 0
(HALF-TIME 1-0) 88/89

TOWN: Sealey; R. Johnson, Foster, Donaghy, Dreyer; Williams, Wilson, Black; Hill, Oldfield (Wegerle, 68 mins), Harford. Other sub: Breacker.

LIVERPOOL: Hooper; Venison, Molby, Gillespie (Ablett, 26 mins), Nichol; Whelan, Houghton, Beardsley, McDonald; Rush, Barnes. Other sub: Aldridge.

THE GOAL: Mick Harford, soaring header from a free kick by Steve Williams in the third minute.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town six saved and seven wide; Liverpool six saved and nine wide. Corners: 6-5 to Liverpool.

ATTENDANCE: 12,117, best of the season so far, but 300 fewer than for the last Liverpool visit.

REFEREE: John Martin, Hampshire. Still loves giving free kicks on the edge of the box, for both teams.

ENTERTAINMENT: A thriller, with the early goal ensuring that we sat on the edge of our seats for the next 88 minutes.