

MARVIN JOHNSON, the 20-year-old novice who has been man enough to fill Mal Donaghy's boots, will never forget his first goal in league football.

It would have been brilliant but for the fact that it was a sliced clearance lobbed into his own net from 25 yards.

It gave Aston Villa a draw they did not deserve in the final home game of the year, but provoked an immediate wave of support and sympathy from within his own team.

Villa were so grateful for their early Christmas present that they simply looked stunned as the ball bounced over Les Sealey. They found it impossible to celebrate a personal tragedy.

And if there was any anger in the Town camp over such a slice of bad luck, it was swamped by a determination to be positive.

Skipper Steve Foster and manager Ray Harford voiced the unanimous view: Johnson had had another splendid game, except for that one isolated incident, when he tried to hook a clearance into touch.

With the Town one up, and looking probable winners, Johnson and Foster had snuffed out the danger of 17-goal Alan McNally, the First Division's leading scorer.

VILLA LUCKY TO SURVIVE

Villa had been lucky to hold the deficit to one, had never looked like troubling Sealey, and a mid-table place in the table was there for the Town's taking.

But with just over an hour played Johnson scored, after running towards his own goal, pursued hopefully by David Platt as they chased a punted clearance by goalkeeper Nigel Spink.

The own goal raised Villa's spirits, and although the Town did get back into their stride for the last 15 minutes, they were not as potent as they had been.

The good news was that the 4-3-3 formation again looked menacing.

The defence was rarely in trouble, the midfield was too quick and clever for Villa, and the attack would have made a bigger impact but for a mixture of bad luck and good saves by Spink.

Marvin Johnson's education has been fierce. Foster has trusted him to be the new Donaghy. There is no man-for-man marking instruction.

Foster and Johnson play alongside each other, and either man takes whichever opponent attacks his zone. And both defenders made McNally and Platt look like also-rans.

"Forget the goal, Marvin — you're a good player," was the consensus opinion, with which I agree. And Mal Donaghy was much more experienced when he last scored an own goal for the Town, at Everton, I think. Watch it, Marvin, or you'll be a target for Manchester United!

The draw extended the Town's run to six games without defeat, and was another chapter in the revival story of David Preece.

His renewed appetite, particularly for attacking down the left, has matched Ricky Hill's, and with Danny Wilson

Match details

LUTON TOWN 1 ASTON VILLA 1 HALF-TIME: 1-0

TOWN: Sealey; Rob Johnson, Foster, Marvin Johnson, Harvey; Wilson, Hill, Preece; Wegerle, Harford, Black. **Subs:** Oldfield. Dreyer.

VILLA: Spink; Price, Evans, Keown, Stuart Gray; Gage, Andy Gray, Cowans; Daley (Birch 72), Platt, McNally. **Other sub:** Mountfield.

THE GOALS: Roy Wegerle for the Town, 41 minutes, crisp low drive after a sweeping passing movement; Marvin Johnson own goal for Villa, 25-yard sliced clearance lobbed over stranded Les Sealey.

OTHER STRIKES: Town seven saved and nine wide; Villa one saved, five wide. **Corners:** 4-2 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 8,785, a drop of 400 on Villa's last previous visit, two years ago.

ENTERTAINMENT: Would have been excellent if the Town had made more of their chances.

REFEREE: Alan Gunn, Sussex — very patient, for which Mick Harford should be grateful after a couple of arms-up challenges on Evans and Spink.

still my man of the season so far, the engine room of the side is a smooth unit.

Kingsley Black almost put right all the damage single-handed when he exploded into shooting form in the second half.

Two efforts were well saved by Spink, and a couple of others went wide or were deflected.

A deflection robbed Wilson, who had wasted a golden opportunity to give the Town the lead in the first half.

I thought the Town's passing football was not quite as good as we had seen at Derby. At home, there is a greater urgency, and an apparent feeling that the passes have to be played much quicker. The eagerness to please your own crowd can be misplaced, like the final pass tends to be when it is over-anxious. Only two of this week's First Division matches ended in home wins, so perhaps it is a psychological problem for other teams as well.

And if one point disappointed us, it was worse for the home supporters at Coventry, Liverpool, West Ham and Nottingham Forest.

Yet the loss of two more home points, for the fifth time this season, was a disappointment because it was so clearly an unrealistic result.

QUALITY OPENER

And at least the goal, four minutes before the interval, was another of genuine quality, and well deserved on the run of play.

It was a passing move that swept the length of the field, starting with Rob Johnson from right back. It ended with Roy Wegerle taking Black's pass, sidestepping a defender and cracking home his sixth goal in as many games with a low drive from the edge of the penalty area.

Spink had kept his side in it until that point, with Villa's only threat a booming volley by Andy Gray which rose slightly too high.

Against that, in a first half which the Town dominated, Preece had seen a clever chip fly agonisingly wide, Foster and Black had been denied by Spink, and Wilson had missed the target when Rob Johnson and Black opened up the Villa defence.

Keown and Evans did a fair job on Mick Harford, and the own goal, followed by ankle injuries which hampered Black and Harford in the final quarter, took the sting out of the Town's finale.

Oddly, after Black's bombardment had come to nothing, Villa nearly nicked a win they never deserved. But Sealey, underemployed until then, made a vital save when sub Paul Birch was clear for a shot he might have buried.

But Spink had been forced to make a better one earlier, to stop Preece making it 2-0.

Brian Swain reports
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Pictures by Josh Levy