

DREAM START TO NEW YEAR

28/89

HAVING left their friends deep in misery at Plough Lane 48 hours previously, Luton Town lifted them to the other extreme at Kenilworth Road on Monday.

The team that caved in so pathetically at Wimbledon rediscovered its pride, and its lethal punch. "The best finishing I have seen since I have been here," was Ray Harford's description of it.

With Mick Harford in superlative form again, the Saints were lucky to go home with only six goals conceded.

It was ironic that manager Chris Nicholl, once a towering figure in the Town's defence, should have been let down so badly by men who have followed in his footsteps at The Dell.

But he took defeat with dignity, as he did three years ago when he was equally mortified after the Town smashed Southampton 7-0.

The Wallace brothers apart, he castigated his side for being mostly garbage, let down by bad defending by men with enough experience to know better.

The mystery no-one could explain was how the Town had been so sharp and effective, putting on a dream performance so soon after a Plough Lane nightmare.

The only team change brought back Kingsley Black in place of David Oldfield. But the tactics made a difference: Mick Harford once more became the spearhead and leader of the attack, rather than the support man behind two others.

And he revelled in the role, reminding us of the Harford who earned his place in the England side.

The Town used more direct passing, and longer balls, and with Harford looking a giant against the pygmy figures of Kevin Moore and Russell Osman, the Saints were overrun.

Conceding a goal with only a minute and 46 seconds played hardly helped their cause, and by the time ten minutes had ticked away the Town were two up and already confident of grabbing the first of a series of home wins needed to prevent relegation doubts turning into major worries.

Southampton were powerless to resist a Town side that attacked from all quarters. They were lucky to be only two down at half-time, yet that posed a potential problem.

One Southampton goal, unlikely though it looked, might have changed the pattern and introduced a little self-doubt into the Town's confident playmaking.

But Mr Nicholl made a crucial mistake in

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deciding to adopt an offside trap, pushing his back four up to the half-way line at every opportunity.

It worked occasionally — yet four more goals went into their net from a second half in which the Town created fewer chances than they had done in the first.

And if the whole team was to blame for the debacle at Wimbledon, the same universal view goes for the brilliant return to form against Southampton.

But my feeling was that the vital difference was the change of role for Harford, and his personal success. He was a thoroughbred outclassing donkeys, embarrassing Moore and Osman in the air and on the ground.

Confidence flooded back through the whole team, with Roy Wegerle and Kingsley Black enjoying tremendous support from Ricky Hill, David Preece and Danny Wilson.

The defence was rarely troubled, although lack of concentration when they were celebrating a Town goal cost them dear when Rod Wallace made it 3-1.

Otherwise, Les Sealey was scarcely extended, and with the Town so much on top Rob Johnson and Richard Harvey were able to get up and join in the mass delivery of crosses from all angles for the front runners.

Black was provider and then taker of the first two goals, within seven minutes. First he made space down the left and crossed accurately for Harford to drift away from markers and power in a header to the top left of John Burridge to make it 1-0. Then Graham Baker played a weak back pass, and Black latched onto it and despatched a low drive past Burridge's left.

The Saints looked groggy, but the knock-out was delayed as the Town drove forward for the rest of the first half without hitting the target again.

Wegerle and Marvin Johnson had shots saved, and Wegerle put another wide after Preece's incisive pass and his own speed and control had put him clear.

Black also drove wide from a flick into space by Harford, and Wegerle smashed a shot against the bar from the inside left position after Hill had put him through.

Harford beat Osman in the air with a chest-down on one memorable occasion, but the 25-yard shot rose a fraction too high. The striker was out of luck again when a brilliant

move involving Harvey, Wilson and Hill ended with the cross being only half-controlled. The bounce denied Harford the shot at goal that would have wrapped it up at 3-0 before half-time.

He also had a header saved from Rob Johnson's cross early in the second half, but the third goal, the most important of the lot, arrived in the 53rd minute. Preece attacked down the left, flicked a diagonal pass to Wegerle, and the South African controlled the ball with his right foot, knocked it up for his left, and placed a little lob accurately past a goalkeeper who was entitled to ask how any attacker could be allowed to get away with that sort of cheek.

Southampton revived briefly: from the restart the ball was humped through the middle, the Town central defence let it go, and as Sealey charged out of his area to try to cut out the danger Rod Wallace nipped in and went round him for a goal that turned out to be very little consolation for the visitors.

Within a minute Wegerle had taken another diagonal pass from left to right, delivered by Harvey this time, and smashed in a right foot shot which scorched Burridge's fingertips on its way in.

That was the third goal between the 53rd and 55th minutes, and Southampton had little to offer from then on.

Moore's mistake allowed Black to cross low from the left. Wilson knocked the ball back along the edge of the area and Ricky Hill's low drive was stroked into Burridge's bottom right hand corner to make it 5-1.

Three minutes later, with 71 minutes played, Harford got the second goal he deserved, another gem deliberately heading in Wilson's cross from the right.

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Rob Johnson, Foster, Marvin Johnson, Harvey; Wilson, Hill, Preece; Wegerle, Harford, Black. Subs: Breacker and Dowie, not needed.

SOUTHAMPTON: Burridge; Forrest, Moore, Osman, Statham; Case, Baker, Maddison; Rod Wallace, Le Tissier, Danny Wallace. Subs: Rideout and Benali, spared from the humiliation.

THE GOALS: Mick Harford two, second and 72nd minutes; Roy Wegerle two, 53 and 55 minutes; Kingsley Black seven minutes; Ricky Hill, 68 minutes. Rod Wallace for Southampton, making it 3-1, 54th minute.

OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved, eight wide and one hit the bar; Southampton three saved and three wide. Corners: 4-3 to the Town.

REFEREE: Danny Vickers, Ilford — set no problems at all because Southampton did at least try to play football.

ATTENDANCE: 8,637 — once again a rise of 2,000 on the corresponding game last season.

ENTERTAINMENT: Magic — what a smashing way to start a New Year, particularly after a wretched end to what had been a happy old one.