

MURDERED BY A BRILLIANT TEAM

88/89

LIVERPOOL 5 LUTON TOWN 0

COMPLETE MASTERS of everything they tried, Liverpool dished out a cruel caning at Anfield on Tuesday night. Luton Town had no choice but to take it, and no excuse to offer for their heaviest defeat of the season.

They did not need any — it was obvious to all that Liverpool had produced one of the most brilliant displays of classic football you could wish to see.

"The lads are shell-shocked. They have had an education tonight," said manager Ray Harford.

"I should think that for everyone except the Luton people it was a tremendous game of football."

On a night when freezing rain lashed Anfield from an Irish Sea wind that felt as though it was coming from the North Pole the Town could not even point to the absence of Steve Foster as a reason. To do so would be a gross injustice to Marvin Johnson, who was put into the skipper's centre-half spot and performed heroically. It may sound crazy to supporters who were not there, but the Town defence played well for the most part.

Despite the five goals, and a first-half header which hit a post, Les Sealey hardly had to make any saves of note. Liverpool's knack was to shift men and ball around in stunning patterns, and then make the most of their scoring opportunities.

Mr Harford called the goals "a bit scruffy — out of keeping with the rest of Liverpool's performance."

And he provoked a chorus of agreement in the Pressroom when he made the point that he didn't believe the Town had been that bad a side. It was their bad luck to have to go to Anfield a few days after Liverpool had thrashed Middlesbrough 4-0 at Ayresome Park, and then been given a sniff of a championship possibility as Arsenal faltered.

The absence of Foster the defender may not have been a crucial element in the Town's defeat, although his leadership was missed.

Johnson was preferred to John Dreyer in a Town formation which put Darron McDonough into midfield and

asked Danny Wilson and Ricky Hill to get forward in support of front men Mick Harford and Kingsley Black.

The game plan was to try to keep possession of the ball for as long as possible, and work it around in patient passing moves. It happened sometimes, and even the home crowd applauded some of the neat Town passing operations.

But they lacked bite in the penalty area, against a Liverpool team which harried, covered and supported men with astonishing energy.

The Town knew they would have to soak up pressure, and did it well for more than half an hour. They almost made the policy doubly successful in the early stages, because David Preece stretched brilliantly to hook a centre towards the back of the penalty area, and McDonough's flashing first time drive was deflected narrowly wide.

If that slice of luck had gone the other way, things might have been different, but Liverpool stuck to their pattern and looked more menacing every minute.

They had been unlucky in the 11th minute when Ray Houghton burst through to collect Ronnie Whelan's pass. He got round Sealey, crossed accurately, and John Aldridge's header hit the post and was scrambled away.

The worry for Town fans was that you could not see too many chances arising at the other end, from a team which has the worst away scoring record in the First Division — eight scored on 14 trips is the total now, and none since Harford's winner at Derby on December 12.

It puts too much pressure on the defence and also risks the occasional unlucky break, like the one that put Liverpool on the road to closing the title chase gap in the 34th minute.

A few minutes earlier Tim Breacker had blocked a shot by John Barnes at the end of a sweet, sweeping Liverpool move which had cut the Town to pieces.

Generally the back four were holding their shape well, and there was a suspicion about offside even among Liverpool observers when the champions took the lead.

Whelan played the ball over the top, Houghton was allowed to go on by a linesman who was not in line and with Sealey cut out by a square pass Aldridge accepted the present from close range.

Four minutes before the interval Liverpool's sixth corner was played short to Barnes, and although Sealey parried his shot, Aldridge followed up to net from the rebound.

There was no way back for the Town after that. Iain Dowie was sent on as sub for Preece in the 65th minute, and arrived just in time to see David Beaumont make a mistake. Peter Beardsley punished it, nut-megging Sealey for Liverpool's third goal. From then on they were rampant.

Steve McMahon had the benefit of a lucky deflection off Beaumont to make it 4-0 in the 74th minute and with 14 minutes to go, Aldridge completed his hat-trick with a penalty after Ashley Grimes had knocked him over.

THE MATCH DETAILS

LIVERPOOL: Grobbelaar; Nicol, Gillespie (Burrows, 70 mins), Ablett, Staunton; Houghton, McMahon, Whelan, Barnes (Watson, 70 mins); Beardsley, Aldridge.

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Beaumont, M. Johnson, Grimes; Wilson, Hill, McDonough, Preece (Dowie, 66 mins); Harford, Black. Other sub: Dreyer.

THE GOALS: Three by Aldridge, 34, 41 and 72 mins, the last a penalty; Peter Beardsley 69 mins; Steve McMahon, 74 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Liverpool four saved, 12 wide, one hit a post; Town three saved and eight wide. Corners: 9-4 to Liverpool.

ATTENDANCE: 31,447, a tremendous turn-out on a dreadful night.

REFEREE: Alan Seville, Birmingham — was allowed to enjoy himself by both teams, and if Liverpool's first goal was offside it was the linesman who boobed.

ENTERTAINMENT: Painful for Town fans, except that if you have to see your side beaten it hurts just a little less if the opposition is as majestic as Liverpool were on Tuesday night.