

Cup heroes a shambles in league

22/89

EVEN THE WINNERS went home admitting they had been lucky as the Town lost at home on Saturday.

But it was not much consolation for supporters, nor for manager Ray Harford, who was in subdued mood after Sheffield Wednesday nicked their first away win since Ron Atkinson became their manager five weeks ago.

The Town deny they have Wembley on their minds — but there has to be some rational explanation of how a side that has looked good getting there in cup-ties can lose at home in the league to relegation candidates.

Wednesday took full advantage of their inside information, provided by Richie Barker, chief coach at Kenilworth Road until he joined the Hillsborough staff to try to help Atkinson drag Wednesday out of the relegation mire.

The entertainment was awful for the first 45 minutes, with neither goalkeeper having a shot to save, thanks to a combination of solid defending, offside traps and an apparent fear of losing, and, worst of all, pathetic attacking play.

LITTLE ATTACKING THREAT

With leading scorer Roy Wegerle still out, the Town tried Ricky Hill as the support man behind Mick Harford and Kingsley Black in the first half, with little threat to Chris Turner's goal.

Danny Wilson tried to fill the old Brian Stein role in the hole after the break, and at least the Town looked more potent in attack, only to give away a crucial decider.

The game turned in a matter of seconds in the 48th minute. David Preece's corner produced a drive from Darron McDonough which Black flicked goalwards. It hit the post, Wednesday cleared, and at the other end Steve Foster's attempt to pass to Ashley Grimes fed David Hirst, the lone Wednesday striker. He caught Les Sealey by surprise with a thundering volley from at least 25 yards.

It was the signal for the Town to rouse themselves from their lethargy, and Wednesday's defence had to stand up to a pounding.

But they pulled everyone back, rode their luck and, aided by a couple of good saves, denying Harford and Black, held on to complete the double.

The smallest crowd of the season came to life as well, and if they eventually chanted "What a load of rubbish" it was noticeable that they waited until the last few minutes to give vent to their frustration. Before that there had always been the chance that an equaliser would come.

Tim Breacker's storming right wing runs provided chances which Hill and Harford put narrowly wide.

Iain Dowie was sent on in place of Preece, and had a shot saved, and the Town were convinced they should have had a penalty when Nigel Pearson seemed to hold down Harford to stop the striker rising for a header.

Turner did well to stop a piledriver from Harford, who had controlled a cross by Black on his chest, and turned

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and shot accurately. The keeper also scrambled the ball away, aided by a post, when Black got clear in the last three minutes for a solo run at goal from Harford's flicked pass.

But for all the battering they took, Wednesday survived, although Mr Atkinson had the good grace to smile broadly when he explained their game plan.

"We played the continental way," he said, tongue in cheek. "Absorb and counter-attack."

He added that Richie Barker's up to date knowledge of the Luton players and methods had been invaluable, but added: "Sure we had our moments of good fortune — but it was still a good show."

PRECIOUS POINTS

The win took Wednesday out of the relegation places, and above the Town, and Mr Barker confessed that he was more interested in getting the points than a good performance.

Wednesday are battling for their First Division lives, and the lesson to Luton Town is clear enough. But he agreed that Wednesday were lucky to survive when their goal sparked the Town into attacking life.

Ray Harford said he could hardly believe a team that had done so much attacking in the second half could end up with nothing. He was at a loss to explain the first-half lethargy, as were the players.

"We went forward much more convincingly after Wednesday scored, but we didn't have any luck," he said. "You get a kick in the teeth when things are going against you, and this result was."

What was not said was that it was a day when too many Town players were below their best, and they could not afford that when the opposition was prepared to battle for everything.

THE MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Beaumont, Grimes (Harvey, 78 mins); Wilson, Hill, McDonough, Preece (Dowie, 64 mins); Harford, Black.

SHEFFIELD WED: Turner; Harper, Pearson, Madden (Varadi, 88 mins), Rostron (Galvin, 37 mins); Proctor, McCall, Palmer, Worthington; Whitton, Hirst.

THE GOAL: David Hirst, 25-yard volley from give-away pass by Steve Foster.

OTHER STRIKES: Town six saved, nine wide and one hit a post; Wednesday one saved, seven wide. Corners: 12-4 to the Town.

REFEREE: Darryl Reeves, Uxbridge. Not too impressive. **ATTENDANCE:** 7,776, lowest of the season so far but 439 higher than for last year's visit by Wednesday.

ENTERTAINMENT: Non-existent from two nervy teams in the first half. More lively after the break, but the Town's failure to turn pressure into goals made it a miserable afternoon for their supporters.

ODDSPOT: A phantom whistler in the crowd started blowing for time with 20 minutes to go. Ron Atkinson thought the ref should have accepted the implied advice!