

SLOW STARTERS DESERVE POINT

88/89

QPR 1 LUTON TOWN 1

THE MYSTERY of what is happening to Luton Town before the half-time tea seems to wake them up left manager Ray Harford puzzled, and a little niggled at Loftus Road on Tuesday evening.

But at least he had a valuable away point to celebrate, and a much better performance to enjoy in the second half than we have seen for some time.

Without giving details he admitted that he had dished out a bit of verbal stick at half-time, when the Town were lucky to be level.

Queens Park Rangers, in need of points themselves, were allowed to run the game for the first 45 minutes, and would have been well clear by the interval if their finishing had matched their promising approach work.

The Town were not quite as bad as they had been in the first half against Sheffield Wednesday — could they ever be again? — but they had Les Sealey to thank for three good saves as most of the action was concentrated on his penalty area.

GOOD SAVES

His best was to tip a volley by Alan McDonald over the bar. The others were against Mark Stein and Danny Maddix, a defender who had so little to do at his end of the field he decided to join in the fun at the other.

The rest of Rangers effort was wasted by poor accuracy in the final shot, and to reach half-time on level terms was a bit of a bonus for the Town.

Rangers manager Trevor Francis said: "I was delighted with our team perfor-

mance in the first half. It was exceptionally good except for the lack of goals. You are always concerned that if you have so much of the game and don't score things can go against you."

They did, although Rangers suffered a major blow when Andy Gray, a midfielder playing well up in attack, was carried off with a knee ligament injury with nearly a hour gone.

RESHUFFLED

A reshuffled Town formation, however, had already shaken the Rangers before then with a spate of attacking that made a mockery of the sloppy work that had been seen before the interval.

The manager has been forced to accept that "Wembleyitis" is a possible danger to First Division survival.

Having been disappointed with Saturday's showing against Sheffield Wednesday he made two team changes, with Richard Harvey recalled at left back in place of Ashley Grimes, and new signing Raphael Meade making his debut, with David Preece dropped.

Kingsley Black played in midfield, and while I am still a critic of the 4-4-2 formation when I prefer to see Black taking on defenders and going for goal, the manager's tactics made a lot more sense after the interval.

Darron McDonough and Ricky Hill got further forward to support the front men and Rangers were rocky before Hill put the Town ahead in the 65th minute.

Meade had the bad luck to collect a boot on a hamstring, which did nothing for his pace, but nearly marked his first game for the Town with a goal in the first minute of the second half.

Black intercepted a pass by Colin Clarke in midfield, Hill took over and laid off an instant pass into Meade's path in the inside left position. A shot hit with venomous power left David Seaman glad to beat out the ball and see it booted away for the Town's only corner of the game.

The Town's left wing in the second half had little hope of operating smoothly because a strip of the pitch down one side was more beach than grass.

But with Hill bursting into something like the old style, the Town cut through down the other flank, with McDonough having a drive from one Hill pass saved, and Meade shooting on the turn from another and seeing Seaman scramble to another stop.

On balance of play the Town edged the second half, having lost the first by a long way, and we began to imagine the first away win of the year was on its way when the Town went ahead. McDonough threaded a neat little pass to the right hand edge of the penalty area and Hill carefully placed his shot into the far corner for the Town's first away goal in the league since Mick Harford's winner at Derby on December 10.

But within a minute Rangers had replied, with David Beaumont unlucky to be penalised for high kicking a yard outside the box. Peter Reid touched the free kick sideways and Colin Clarke, an £800,000 signing from Southampton mak-

ing his home debut, smashed in a shot which screamed beyond Sealey into the far corner.

Either side might have snatched victory after that, but on balance the draw was probably right. And at least there were reminders in the second half of the quality football the Town can produce. All the manager has to do now is find how to get something similar before the interval.

MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Beaumont, Harvey; Hill, Wilson, McDonough, Black; Meade (Dowie, 67 mins), Harford. Other sub: Dreyer.

RANGERS: Seaman; Parker, Fereday, McDonald, Maddix; Spackman, Reid, Allen; Stein, Clarke, Gray (Barker, 59 mins). Other sub: Kerslake.

GOALS: Ricky Hill for the Town, low shot into far corner, 65th minute; Colin Clarke for Rangers a minute later, thundering 20-yarder from a short free kick.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved — all in the second half — and four wide; Rangers four saved and eight wide. Corners: 8-1 to Rangers.

REFEREE: John Key, Sheffield. Seemed to give a lot of dodgy free kicks around the edge of the penalty area, with Rangers luckier than the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 9,372.

ENTERTAINMENT: It was "Oh, no, here we go again" in the first half but a lot better in the second. I suggest the pre-match warm-up should be changed to 45 minutes hard six-a-side in future.