

Post shatters debut dream

HAVING MADE the slow start that had become a worrying feature of their previous three games, the Town almost embarrassed Manchester United in the second half at Old Trafford on Saturday.

Forcing their way back into contention with neat football, they saw debut boy Richard Cooke hit a post, and an Iain Dowie effort fly inches too high as a restless crowd fidgeted and waited for the final whistle.

"I have no complaints about the attitude and application we showed," said manager Ray Harford. "Even the bad start, with United scoring very early, produced a good response."

"We could have got something out of that game, and probably deserved a point.

UNITED TESTED

It was a fair judgement on a game that rarely broke into a sweat. But although United were tested in the second half, I had the feeling that by then they felt they were in control and in no great danger of losing.

Neither goalkeeper was overworked, but Les Sealey had to make the two best saves, beating out a piledriver by Bryan Robson in the 59th minute and then brilliantly tipping over a half-volley from Ralph Milne.

The fact that the Town's first shot on target, a stinging drive by Kingsley Black, did not materialise until an hour had gone, underlines how low key it all was.

United boss Alex Ferguson is trying to persuade his men that they still have a chance of the league championship, but they hardly looked as though they believed it.

The Town have never won at Old Trafford, and haven't even scored there for 30 years, since

**MANCHESTER UTD 2
LUTON TOWN 0**

the late John Kilgannon was on target in a 4-1 defeat.

They made problems for themselves this time, with United helped to a goal in the third minute. David Preece sliced an attempted clearance into his own penalty area, David Beaumont's header dropped to the opposition, and Russell Beardsmore was given the ball on the right. His pace took him clear of Richard Harvey, and although Mark Hughes miscued his shot the ball ran on kindly for United. Milne, on the far side, placed on a low drive into the corner of the net from close range.

The Town had to defend for a spell, with a couple of off-target shots by Danny Wilson and Mick Harford spoiling promising breaks.

Ricky Hill, Preece and Wilson all worked well to get up in support of Harford and Black, and the two front men worked willingly to help the Town even up the balance of play.

But they were caught stretched when United got their second, Brian McClair's through-ball pierced the defensive cover and Clayton Blackmore came from deep to run through and score.

The Town looked calm in possession, but Mal Donaghy, at left back, did enough of a job on Hill to earn Ferguson's nomination of man of the match.

Harford made himself available on either flank, up front or deep, and often dragged two opponents out of position.

But for all their neat approach work, the Town could not get to close quarters for the first hour or so.

When they did United looked vulnerable. Preece almost put in Wilson, but the half-back

away from him, and Black's instant defeat of Jim Leighton to dive hurriedly for the goal.

Richard Cooke went on as sub for Wilson with 20 minutes to go. United happy with the change — in two appearances for Bournemouth Cooke had won four left backs who had tried without success.

And it might have been a dream for the little winger who likes to drift inside. In the 79th minute he caused the defenders to meet a cross from the header had Leighton beaten, but he was off the post.

Iain Dowie was sent on to replace eight minutes to go, and he also tested United's defence could be vulnerable. Breacker's ring wing cross was met by the header which had Leighton groping for it, but he had to settle for a header in an inch or two over the bar.

MATCH DETAILS

MAN UTD: Leighton; Martin, Brown, Donaghy; Robson, Blackmore, Milne; Preece (Majiorana, 80 mins); McClair, Hughes, Gills.

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Preece, Harford, Wilson, McClair, Black, Blackmont, Harvey; Hill, Wilson (Cooke, 70 mins); McDonough, Preece (Dowie, 82 mins); Black.

THE GOALS: Ralph Milne, 19th; Clayton Blackmore, 25th.

OTHER STRIKES: Town three shots on target; United two. Town three saves; wide, one hit a post; United three saves; wide. Corners: 3-3.

ATTENDANCE: 36,335 — 19,000 from the previous Old Trafford match, a crowd of 19,000 for the last of the season. Final against Nottingham Forest. United complained it made for a lack of atmosphere.

REFEREE: Ray Nixon. Warral, Harford, although it looked an easy game to come to a conclusion.

ENTERTAINMENT: Perked up considerably in the second half when the Town started to